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## The view from below: marginalised young people's biographical encounters with criminal justice agencies

Marginalised young people's biographical encounters with criminal justice agencies

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*This article reflects on what we can learn about criminal justice policy and practice approaches to 'socially excluded' young men and women who are 'at risk' of offending, from detailed, long-term, qualitative research with such people. We reflect on young people's views 'from below' of their encounters with police, prison and probation and the consequences of these for their transitions to adulthood. Theoretically, the article concludes that processes of exclusion for these young adults have their basis in macro-level, socio-economic change which frame opportunities, choices and pathways at individual, biographical level. Between these 'public issues' of social structure and 'private troubles' of individual biography, however, are ranged social institutions, such as their various parts of the criminal justice system that we focus on, that can play negative or positive roles in processes of social inclusion and exclusion.*

### Introduction

This article reflects on what we can learn about criminal justice policy and practice approaches to 'socially excluded' young men and women who are 'at risk' of offending, from detailed, long-term, qualitative research with such people.<sup>1</sup> We stress at the outset that we do not seek to add to the enormous literature that evaluates different criminal justice approaches or interventions. Rather, our biographical method prioritised understanding these young adults' lives from their point of view. In telling and seeking to explain their stories, interviewees would, as necessary, describe their encounters with elements of the criminal justice system and the consequences for their transitions to adulthood. It is these different experiences that form the basis of the article.

We begin by briefly describing the research studies we have undertaken and, next, sketch out the contours of the 'criminal careers' these studies revealed. The core of the paper then focuses on: (a) young people's teenage leisure and encounters with the police; (b) experiences of Young Offender's Institutes and prison; and (c) multi-agency probation-led interventions that target young offenders like those we discuss. Inclusion of the latter example provides, as we will see, a telling counterpoint to the general experience these young people had of criminal justice interventions.

### The Teesside studies of youth transition & social exclusion

The first two of our studies -- *Snakes and Ladders*<sup>2</sup> and *Disconnected Youth?*<sup>3</sup> -- both explored how working-class young people (aged 15 to 25 years) made transitions to adulthood in contexts of multiple deprivation. These projects were undertaken in the poorest wards of one of the poorest towns of England: perfect territory in which to grapple with popular concepts and theories of youth exclusion and marginalisation. At the time of fieldwork in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the seven wards that comprised our research sites all featured in the top 5% most deprived nationally.<sup>4</sup>

Both studies used participation observation and, in total, interviews with approximately 50 professionals who worked with young people. At their core, though, these studies relied on biographical interviews<sup>5</sup> with 186 young people (82 females and 104 males) from the predominantly white, (ex)manual working-class population resident in 'one of the most de-industrialised locales in the UK'.<sup>6</sup>

The third study -- *Poor Transitions*<sup>7</sup> -- explored where earlier youth transitions *led* these individuals in their mid to late 20s. Fieldwork was undertaken in 2003, between 2 and 4 years after our first interviews. We re-interviewed 34 people (18 females and 16 males), aged 23 to 29 years, from the two original samples. A particular focus was on the longer-term transitions of people with serious involvement in drugs and crime at earlier interviews.

Longitudinal qualitative youth research, as with these three Teesside studies, is relatively rare in British social science.<sup>8</sup> They were also unusual in having such a broad focus on transitions, taking in young people's 'careers' in respect of employment, housing, family, leisure, drug use and crime. Space precludes mention of anything other than one key finding of these studies (ie beyond what they might say about criminal careers, to which we turn soon). Regardless of variation in other aspects of their lives (eg in terms of parenthood or housing moves), economic marginality was the preserve of virtually all. They shared an employment history comprised of churning, non-progressive movement around low-level jobs, training places and time on 'the dole'.

We also refer here to a fourth, slightly different study.<sup>9</sup> This was an evaluation of the *Hartlepool Dordrecht Crime Reduction Initiative* (hereafter referred to as the Dordrecht Project). The approach was pioneered in the Dutch city of Dordrecht and Hartlepool was the second town in the UK to replicate it. The Probation led partnership drew in a wide range of support to aid offenders to desist from crime (eg mental health services, drug treatment, accommodation). Persistent offenders were offered these 'carrots' (participation was 'voluntary' for those otherwise facing a custodial sentence) which were backed up with the 'sticks' of intensive supervision and the threat of 'return' to prison for breaches of conditions.

## Young men's criminal careers: Teesside findings in brief

More detailed discussion can be found elsewhere of young people's criminal careers,<sup>10</sup> desistance from them,<sup>11</sup> and our critique of orthodox risk factor approaches to youth crime.<sup>12</sup> We provide only a very brief overview here.

The majority of the 186 young adults in our combined sample from the first two Teesside studies reported no offending whatsoever (n. 100). A further 21 described very short-lived offending in their early teens (eg shop-lifting or criminal damage) and 18 interviewees gave accounts of offending that were not detailed or clear enough to use.<sup>13</sup>

Forty seven reported recurrent offending, all of whom had convictions and 33 of who had been imprisoned. Twenty six of these 47 were or had been opiate users and only three of these were young women.<sup>14</sup> It is these 44 young men that provide the basis for this sketch of typical, more serious, longer-term criminal careers.

A first key process in the formation of these criminal careers was the hardening up of disaffecting school experiences into full-blown educational disengagement and persistent truancy.<sup>15</sup> Engagement in 'street corner society' further entrenched oppositional identities and sub-cultural commitment to friends and was the cornerstone for the evolution of most careers of crime that extended beyond early to mid-teenage:<sup>16</sup>

'just me and this other lad used to nick off all the time ... just go and hang about the town ... that was me starting days of crime and that, yeah. Shoplifting and pinching bikes, that's what it was.' (Danny, 21, YO1 inmate)

Dull truant time was enlivened by the camaraderie of shoplifting jaunts, petty thieving and speeding around the estates in stolen vehicles: crime as leisure for bored, out-of-school teenagers. For *some*, this period marked the early phases of criminal apprenticeships, such as learning the routines of more acquisitively-oriented offending and local criminal markets. For *many*, though, these sorts of infringements -- coupled with underage drinking and recreational use of drugs such as cannabis, amphetamines and ecstasy -- marked the extent, and end-point, of criminal careers.

The second key process that helped to drag out a smaller number of individual's criminal career, transmuted them into something more destructive, is when heroin enters the scene. Parker et al map the 'second wave of heroin outbreaks' in Britain during the mid-1990s, with Teesside a classic case.<sup>17</sup> Local police and drugs workers reported how very cheap heroin flooded into its working-class housing estates in the mid-1990s. Previously the area had had a negligible heroin using population. Some of Teesside's young people seemed unprepared to resist the temptations of this 'poverty drug' (that eased feelings of guilt and failure) and made speedy transitions from recreational use of drugs such as cannabis to often daily, dependent use of heroin.

For this minority (n. 23), heroin dependency drove exclusionary transitions and entangled them in damaging careers of drug-driven crime.<sup>18</sup> Increasingly chaotic acquisitive criminality was fuelled by the need for daily drug money:

'Prior to 16 I'd had a few cautions. It just got worse as I was getting older. I went from ecstasy to heroin. Doing it daily to feed my habit so I was robbing everything in sight. Whatever I could sell, I'd rob. It did for me, heroin. Shoplifting, thefts, then burglary and robbery.' (Barney, 20)

Heroin use became central to an understanding of their unfolding biographies and the downward trajectory typical of these young men. Their interviews were replete with stories of family estrangement, homelessness, joblessness, ill-health, bereavement, failed desistance, successive imprisonment, loss, regret, shame.

## Encounters with the state

Turning from this introduction, in the following sections we now consider how young people in our studies experienced elements of the criminal justice system beginning with a brief discussion of their encounters with the police.

### ***Being policed***

Discussion of the police was rarely initiated by researchers in interviews. It usually came spontaneously from interviewees, often tangentially to other topics of discussion (eg how they spent their leisure time). In trawling through 186 interview transcripts -- and it is interviews with all young people in the *Snakes and Ladders* and *Disconnected Youth* studies we discuss in this section, not just those with longer-term criminal careers -- we did not find any unequivocally positive account of being policed. That said, strongly negative descriptions were rare too. Instead, interviewees appeared to regard the police as a nuisance to be tolerated and/or a service that failed them and their neighbourhoods.

For virtually the entire sample, much of their free time out of school during their early teenage years was spent in socialising and 'hanging around' in the company of other young men and women in the public

spaces of their estates. Gillian (aged 16) was typical. During the evenings she and her friends would 'just probably walk about the streets or just sit in the house and just talk ... most of the time we don't hang around near houses or nowt. We just meet in, like, fields and that'. Whilst these neighbourhoods are relatively well served by youth clubs, few attended: 'you can't go into a youth club at 17! Cos they're all young 'uns, aren't they? All there is ... it's a lack of everything. There's nothing to do, just streets to walk down and stuff like that' (Richy, 17). The Prince's Trust also found that 'almost half of all socially excluded young people ... believe there is a lack of things for them to do' in the areas where they live.<sup>19</sup>

This 'street corner society' was, however, not *just* a residual, 'nowt for us to do' outcrop of being a teenager with little money on an urban estate. It provided a *normal*, unremarkable but positive opportunity for unsupervised time away from adults, for exploration of youth identities, for romantic relationships, for fun. Hall and colleagues explain the pull of the 'street' in the same way:<sup>20</sup>

'This is free space, where attendance is neither necessary (as at home) nor compulsory (as at school) but chosen ... clearly, this space is for leisure, but it does not follow that what takes place there is unimportant ... it is in the course of such informal interaction, away from parents and teachers, that significant aspects of young people's personal and social identities are affirmed, contested, rehearsed and reworked.'

This sort of description of young people 'on the streets' is not the typical one. The public social life of teenagers in working-class neighbourhoods has long been a source of intense social anxiety.<sup>21</sup> We suspect that the sort of 'street corner society' we report is the same as that which attracts the universal condemnation of the press, policy commentaries and local politicians.<sup>22</sup> Reports about area regeneration or local policing regularly highlight the alleged antisocial behaviour of groups of youths 'on the street' as a pressing problem for local residents. Describing three socially excluded neighbourhoods, Page says 'large numbers of unsupervised children and teenagers who gather in groups were a feature of all estates' and that 'on all estates, and across all age groups, the biggest single issue identified by respondents was the antisocial behaviour of children and teenagers'.<sup>23</sup> A previous study in our research site found that adult residents identified 'crime' and 'young people' as the two issues which impacted most negatively upon quality of life and that these problems were perceived as synonymous.<sup>24</sup> The impulse of respectable, adult society to corral and control those engaged in apparently unproductive, street-based leisure -- especially working class, young men -- has culminated over the past decade in the imposition of 'Anti-Social Behaviour Orders' and night-time street curfews on British youth.<sup>25</sup> Scraton provides an expert summary of how social fears of young people have fed into this recent intensification of the surveillance and criminalisation of young people under recent UK governments.<sup>26</sup>

Predictably, the local police response has been to deter and disperse gatherings of young people on these estates. Interviewees knew, through their daily experience, that they commonly signified a disorderly presence to be complained about, surveyed and moved on by adult authorities (chiefly the police). Haydon and Scraton report the same in research with young people in Northern Ireland, citing very high levels of 'negative' contact between teenagers and the police, particularly in the most deprived areas.<sup>27</sup> McAra and McVie's research from Scotland also points to the way that the police draw upon class and age-based stereotypes in their policing of 'the usual suspects'.<sup>28</sup>

Detached youth workers we interviewed reported that they had to go out earlier and earlier in the evening if they were to find young people on the streets to engage, befriend and work with. Other public servants -- the police -- were busy moving young people along, advising them to return to their homes, directing them away. One youth work response to young people's preference for unsupervised association and to the antagonisms that this can generate with older residents has been the development of a 'youth shelter' on one estate. This modest initiative -- similar to a large bus shelter with lighting and seating, situated several hundred yards from the nearest houses -- met with an enormous response, with over one hundred young people congregating there on some evenings.

To be clear, young people did not *define* street-based leisure as a forum for delinquency and were keen to

dissociate themselves from this perception. In their view, *everybody* took part not just the 'hard lads' or 'bad lads' (an argument confirmed by our study).<sup>29</sup> Several informants made a point of saying that they congregated away from shops and houses; in fields, parks, at 'the beck' (a stream that ran through one estate), 'behind the old swimming baths', so as to avoid causing trouble to local, older residents and the perception that they might be doing so. As Gillian, earlier, stressed 'we don't hang around near houses or nowt'.

Regardless of the normality of this sort of leisure to them, young people felt the pressure of age-discriminatory policing:

'No, I've never been in trouble with the police ... apart from when I'm with my brother. I dunno, I think it's just him. He just gets pulled up all the time ... just walking home with me ... they just asked if they could search him ... to see if there was a warrant out for him and there wasn't so they just let him go. Then we got pulled up about half a mile down the road, near the shops, then we got to nearby home and someone else pulled us up ... we just told 'em that somebody else has just pulled us up and they let us go and we got home! ... I wasn't bothered. They just wanted him, to know why he was out so late, what he's been doing and that was it.' (Alex, 19)

Alex reported no criminal involvement to us (and described her brother as has having never offended either). What is most interesting about this extract is how it stands for a more general experience of, first, young people being recurrently stopped and questioned by the police and, secondly, the 'taken for granted' attitude of interviewees to this experience (with the latter in part reflecting the commonness of the former). For instance, Liam (aged 22) also reported repeatedly being stopped and (in his case) an incident of wrongful arrest:

'I could've sued 'em but I thought, no, there's no point, they're only doing their job. So I just left it ... they don't actually hassle you. You might be just walking down the road at say 12 o'clock at night, they'll pull you up and they'll check to see if you've got anything, what you can do like robbery with ...'

Stevo (18) confirmed this general experience:

'Yeah, it's happened loads of times. It happens to everyone. Mostly young lads, like us. Pulling us over, seeing if they can get anything on us. Looking for trouble; to lock people up. It happened a couple of nights ago on Regency Road. Some of 'em [police officers] are alright but some of 'em are dead moody to you, bossing you about, dead cocky with you and all that. So you give 'em lip back.'

Stevo's interview was one of the few who were more critical view of the way that young people and their neighbourhoods were policed. It was put to him that it was the police's job to apprehend potential criminals:

'Yeah, but our Mam's phoned the bobbies when she's been burgled and all they've done is come round, asked her a couple of questions -- like "do you know who it was?" If you knew who it was you wouldn't be phoning the bobbies, would you! They don't help you get your stuff back or anything.'

Of course, some of our interviewees *were* offenders and these neighbourhoods, at the time of the research, were troubled by crime, particularly drug-related offending. Far more of the interviewees were victims of crime (of burglary, car theft, criminal damage and assault) than perpetrators and the lack of responsiveness of the police to immediate and persistent problems was a common complaint across interviewees. Linda (23) commented: 'they're just not operating on the factors what we say, they're doing nothing about it, it's been the same for absolutely years, where we live!' Stuart (26) added: 'they go past very quickly chasing cars. That's all you ever see of 'em'.

In sum, we uncovered a picture wherein young people's normal, *non-delinquent* street-based leisure clashed with popular negative stereotypes of 'the youth problem' and brought down on them routine stopping and questioning by the police, *regardless* of their involvement in any offending. Perhaps what is most striking is

not this regular infringement of young people's civil liberties but the stoicism with which it is tolerated and told to researchers, especially in a context where they perceived that the police often failed to react properly to their own criminal victimisation.

### ***Being imprisoned***

For those young men with more serious, lengthy criminal careers being imprisoned was a not uncommon experience (33 out of 44 longer-term offenders had been). Many had served several sentences 'inside'.

Interviews described two distinct responses to imprisonment. The first was that incarceration is just part of the 'normal business' and risks of a criminal life-style. Only a small handful expressed these sentiments. For instance, Stu (20) and Jason (21) felt hardened to prison and saw it as an 'occupational hazard'. Since the age of 16, each of them had spent more time in prison than out of it and, when interviewed in a Young Offenders Institute (YOI), were contemplating what they imagined to be less risky crimes 'on the out' (drug dealing rather than burglary and shop-lifting). Jason said 'it's not bad. You've got your colour telly, there's plenty of freedom, I've got my jobs; easy really'. Barney (20) agreed that imprisonment 'gets to be a doddle' after the first stint. He had served his first sentence in the same YOI as his elder brother; the latter inducting Barney into the informal rules, 'the dos and don'ts', of surviving prison life. Nevertheless, the boredom of prison was a common complaint:<sup>30</sup>

'the worst thing it's the same routine everyday, being on the same wing every day, banged up all the time. Boring ... there's no good things about prison, is there? You've just gotta make this as easy as you can get it while you're in here.'  
(Barney)

The lack of distraction and positive activity -- and, at the time, drug treatment<sup>31</sup> -- meant that Barney continued to use heroin and estimated that he had 'turkeyed four or five times' since being inside (ie suffered the unpleasant physical effects of withdrawal from heroin). Barney's first prison sentence had, in fact, been for smuggling drugs into prison for his elder brother and more recently his brother had returned the favour for him: 'balloons up the arse'.

For some, the second main response to imprisonment was, conversely, to regard it as a turning point in life, as either a sign for the need for personal change and/or the opportunity to enact that change.

By the end of his teens, Richard (20), for instance, had had a lengthy criminal record (mainly shop-lifting and burglary) driven by his heroin use. He described prison as a way of 'getting me head sorted out. I'm glad I'm in here. It keeps me away from out there, all those heroin users.' Compared with his recent experiences -- of homeless hostels, of being assaulted when sleeping rough, of failed drug treatment programmes -- incarceration was welcomed by Richard. This was one of the most common and startling findings of the research. For those young men who had come to a point where they wished to desist from crime and to escape drug dependency, imprisonment was often regarded as a better option than continued freedom. It provided a welcome opportunity to withdraw from heroin (albeit often under a harsh, non-therapeutic regime). A few had even sought a prison sentence (rather than probation supervision) as a way of escaping the recurrent drug temptations 'of the street'. Similarly, release from prison was normally viewed with trepidation because it signalled a return to the generative environment of their initial drug dependency: 'you're just going back to the same place, the same group of people and it's easy to get back into it' (Stu, 20).

We sought to hold second interviews with participants in the *Disconnected Youth* study. By the time we came to re-interview him, Danny (19) was serving his first sentence in a YOI, for assault. Instead of a face to face interview, he replied by letter to some questions we sent him.

*'How do you feel about your prison sentence?'*

'At first I didn't really know, as it was my first sentence. When my solicitor said expect 2-3 years I was discrased (sic) in

my self. I also thought of my family because it took long to get sentenced and it settled in on me so I got more relaxed. When it came to getting sentenced and I got 15 months I was actually feeling a lot better (chuffed really).'

*'Do you think going to prison has affected the way you will think about things in the future?'*

'Yes, definitely, it's helped me think what I want from life and what I am going to do in life. I know I'll not be back because it's down to me to decide that and being here has helped me know that.'

Unusually, Danny successfully accessed training courses of different types whilst serving his sentence, what he described as 'army preparation courses', which further fuelled his ambition to desist from crime. More typically, Matthew (19) said, also by letter, 'the only training I've had is weight training ... haven't been long enough in one place to work my way up the waiting list for any of the courses'. Whilst many young men in prison felt it as a turning point in their life it often failed to provide the basis for a better one, as we discuss further in conclusion.

### ***Being on probation: a multi-agency initiative***

Our three main Teesside studies threw up very little discussion of being on probation. The few comments all revolved around 'good' (ie trustworthy, 'chilled out' and able and willing to provide positive, practical help) versus 'bad' Probation Officers (ie disrespectful, overly 'nosey' or ignorant of client's cases). For this reason we draw on a fourth study, an evaluation of the Hartlepool Dordrecht Initiative ('the Dordrecht Project'). As described earlier, this multi-agency partnership aims to reduce offending by addressing the multiple problems and needs that can underpin an individual's offending:

'there's police and there's, like, the drugs nurse, the drugs workers, there's ones that'll help you with your housing. It's all rolled into one really. Everything you ever needed to get yourself put straight.' (Jackie, 30)

A key factor behind the success of the Dordrecht Project was this cohesive, multi-agency staff team, established with the understanding that offending *and* desistance from offending typically involve multiple factors. Thus, the support it gave clients in respect of their drug treatment, housing, education, employment, leisure and training needs was evaluated very positively by clients.

Illicit, problematic use of heroin and crack cocaine was a significant, contributory factor in the offending of a very large proportion of the Dordrecht Project's clients. Desistance from crime was often dependent on desistance from problematic drug use. Because of previous, failed attempts to stop using drugs, drug treatment was seen by many as the most important aspect of the Dordrecht Project's provision. Carl, 20, simply said: 'what's good? It's getting me off the drugs and all, innit?' Ricky, 24, gave a fuller answer:

'It's helped me get on the methadone ... straightaway it was a beeline straight to that. That was my problem, drugs, do you know what I mean? ... they mentioned that they'll fast-track you on to the methadone and I thought that's going to help better than anything, instead of doing my cold turkey in jail and coming out here even worse, feeling like a bear with a sore head, all the pain for months, and I'll just go straight back out again [to commit crime] and I think that's wrong ... If I didn't have the methadone I'd be on about £40-£50 [worth of heroin] a day and run about all over to get it, you know what I mean? Like, I wake up in the morning now and I don't think "where am I going to get a tenner from?" I just have to go and get my bus pass and get my methadone which is a great help really. I can't credit them [the Dordrecht Project] enough for that.'

The drug treatment here was perceived to be better than on previous treatment programmes because it was provided with some urgency. Webster and Robson bemoan the usually lengthy waiting times for treatment locally, which can delay or deter desistance.<sup>32</sup> Staff also operated with a more sympathetic and holistic approach to their drugs and other problems, tolerating occasional lapses in their treatment regimes. Overall,

the 'genuine' and 'caring' approach of staff emerged as crucial in client's commitment to the intervention.

'I've received 150 per cent support on this project! ... the Probation have tried working with us in the past and they've never had any result. I've always re-offended ... you can turn to Dordrecht. They're only at the end of the 'phone. Everything I need -- if it did crop up -- Dordrecht would help me with it.' (Kevin)

These types of comments were in contrast to the negative views many clients had of probation, police and drug workers. Francis, 28, for instance contrasted 'the brilliant' staff of the Dordrecht Project who 'proper care' about him, treat him as a 'normal person', with 'respect' and 'understand all about [his] problems', with 'previous probation orders, [where] they treat you like scum'. We asked Ricky whether the Dordrecht Project was different to other support he had had as part of his lengthy offending history:

'I've never really *had* any support. Nowt. Only drugs clinics where if you louse up you're going to get booted off and that's it. But this, they're genuine. I found that refreshing. When I used to get sent to jail they just banged you up, do your time and come out again but this, they really talk to you and really listen to you. Before it was just a sentence, then [they] don't bother no more ... but this, eight years later, I was astonished. There was nothing like this before. I didn't know this existed ... I can't see myself in jail. I can't see myself offending. I've worn that T-shirt too long. I want to get free of this heroin lark. That's my aim.'

## Discussion

The aim of the paper has been to distil young adults' experiences of encounters with agencies and institutions of the sort that are likely to bear on careers of crime and desistance from crime. In this process we have at times referred to the general experience of the wide samples of our research and at others talked more particularly about the experiences of young men caught up in longer term offending (and others like them who were client of the Hartlepool Dordrecht Project). What can we learn from this discussion?

First -- obviously -- the elements of the criminal justice system that we have discussed are of different types, with different scales and different remits. We have compared, for instance, a national, statutory police service with a local, multi-agency initiative. But if we are serious in understanding 'the view from below' these are not significant distinctions. All are 'them'. Treated with mistrust and circumspection until experience tells otherwise, encounters with adult professional workers in different roles (with earlier experiences of school and teachers establishing this outlook) had led interviewees to be wary of 'authority'. 'Teachers', 'police', 'probation officers', 'youth workers', 'social workers', 'researchers', were, in this sense, the same; at least at first brush. Thus, with obvious implications for professional practice, problematic dealings with authority in one sphere (eg with 'bossy teachers' or 'lippy police') quickly set the tone and starting point for later encounters with adult professionals in quite separate spheres.

Secondly, despite the generally negative and occasionally shocking substance of reports we heard from young people about these encounters, they were conveyed with a common sense tone of world weary acceptance: 'this is what life is like for us'. Shock was ours not theirs and interviewees were sometimes surprised at our questions about these things. Scraton's review<sup>33</sup> of the politics of young people and criminal justice in the UK puts it nicely: 'significantly, children and young people witness the rhetoric of inclusion and stake-holding, knowing they are peripheral, rarely consulted and regularly vilified. Disrespect is their *expected* daily reality'.<sup>34</sup>

In this paper we have not had the space to recount young people's accounts of post-school labour market transitions. There too we found the same 'taken for granted' acceptance: that school would be demeaning, irrelevant and boring; that training schemes would be poor quality, promise-breaking, pointless cheap labour; that programmes and services to help them into work would be ineffective and tedious wastes of time; and that employers in the casualised lower reaches of the labour market would treat young workers in unfair, exploitative and sometimes illegal ways.<sup>35</sup> A similar sense of puzzlement that their experiences might be note-worthy or unusual met our general interest in what it was like to grow up in some of Britain's poorest



neighbourhoods, with it being quite usual for interviewees to reject outright the idea that these neighbourhoods, that featured in the 10 most deprived in England, were poor or deprived.

Across interviews and topics, then, informants displayed a curious combination of personal resilience and acquiescence; these interviewees were emphatically not politically minded and seemed disenfranchised from any discourse of social justice. A founding theoretical approach in contemporary youth studies interpreted working-class youth sub-cultures as offering up embryonic political resistance to the bourgeois status quo, hidden perhaps in stylistic rebellion.<sup>36</sup> Certainly, any explicit resistance amongst our interviewees was muted and constrained. What resistance there was was not verbalised clearly but was more embodied and physically expressed, for example, in decisions to truant from school, quit training schemes or, more immediately, in the 'hard' demeanour many young men presented at first meeting.

Thirdly, our discussion points to important differences in how these criminal justice interventions were received. Compare the way that the Dordrecht Project was described (as showing respect, interest, care and trust) with the reportedly disrespectful, untrusting approach of the police to *all* young people on the streets of these neighbourhoods, by virtue of their age and their 'normal' youth leisure, regardless of any wrong-doing.

The relative success of this project can also be explained by the fact that the activities, opportunities and support it offered were grounded in an understanding of these young people's lives and what was valuable and needed by them at that time (eg quick access to drug treatment). Participants were not compelled into (further) unrealistic or ineffective employability courses, for instance. We also see the importance of offering a *range* of support to young adults in marginal, excluded situations. Their life situations were marked by deprivation and problems in several spheres (housing, leisure, drug use, employment, offending behaviour, etc) and successfully helping young people toward less destructive and marginalised lives requires effort across these spheres. The positive commentaries and success of this project, particularly in comparison with more negative experience elsewhere, is evidence that some interventions can 'work'. It shows how the offer of *repeated* opportunities -- second, third and fourth chances -- to make good, after earlier failures, is critical in pathways to desistance from crime and drug use.

Our studies, particularly the later ones, allowed us to examine in detail processes of desistance from crime.<sup>37</sup> In addition to access to decent drug treatment and disconnection from powerful peer groups, the studies confirmed findings from relevant criminological literature about what helps desistance; specifically, the getting of more regular employment, the forming of new, stable partnerships (with 'straight', non-drug involved women) and the (usually unplanned) coming of fatherhood.<sup>38-39</sup> Notably, these three 'aids to desistance' also signal the key processes and symbolic markers said to signify the movement from youth to adulthood.<sup>40</sup>

In thinking about the processes of 'growing out of crime',<sup>41</sup> then, we can reflect on the relative normalcy of the factors that 'helped', seeing desistance as a normal process of maturation and the transition to adulthood. For working-class young people in these neighbourhoods who carry the weight of personal histories of drugs and crime, achieving these 'normal' steps was extraordinarily difficult. Young men like these are unlikely to appear attractive as potential employees, partners and fathers. Whilst others in the sample were making efforts to progress, the school-to-work, family and housing careers of this group were held on pause as they struggled to disentangle themselves from crime and drugs. That is why interventions like the Dordrecht Project have such a valuable role helping these young men 'go straight': they provide, at crucial biographical junctures, *alternative* purposeful activities in which to engage energies and structure daily life and through which to contemplate different biographical possibilities, in the absence of more formal, standard ones.

Finally, and briefly, we note the ambiguous positioning of imprisonment in young offenders accounts. It was sometimes positively welcomed and, on occasions, sought in preference to community sentences (with a further small minority regarding it simply as part of the risks of ongoing criminality). This is difficult to understand unless we grasp that, at the time of interview, many informants were striving to desist from crime. For a few, the shock of a custodial sentence spurred the move to desistance. For more, prison offered a *venue* where the already begun process of desistance might better come about. Interviewees hoped to get away from the peer groups that pushed their criminal careers along and/or to enter a forum where they could

withdraw from their drug dependency (notwithstanding the fact that drugs, as informants found, were often still available 'on the inside').

It would be perverse to conclude, however, that prison should be regarded as a positive encounter for young adults. Rather, that some young offenders get to the position where they regard imprisonment as *the best option* they could face is surely an indictment of the lack of alternative serious, good quality, sustained support available to them within and without the criminal justice system? Whilst some individuals felt it would help their desistance from crime, overall we found that lengthy, often repeated imprisonment acted as a moratorium on the achievement of normal youth transitions to adulthood, sometimes jeopardised biographical re-orientation away from criminal identities and slowed down or stalled 'natural' processes of desistance from crime and drug use.

## Conclusion

On a theoretical level, we have argued elsewhere that properly understanding the lives of socially excluded young adults requires locating these biographies within wider panoramas of history and place.<sup>42</sup> As the sociologist C. Wright Mills<sup>43</sup> famously put it, we need to connect the 'private troubles' of biography with 'public issues' of wider society:

'The problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. Within that range the life of the individual and the making of societies occur; and within that range the sociological imagination has its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time.'<sup>44</sup>

As part of our wider research and theorising we have tried to rise to the challenge of 'the sociological imagination' set out by Mills. We have thought hard about how to balance explanation of young adult's lives at the level of individual choices and 'personal troubles' and explanation at the level of the 'public issues' of wider society. For instance, we have examined whether individual's personal characteristics and 'risk factors' (eg gender, family type, educational qualifications, post-16 training) explained the particulars of their transitions (eg whether they had long-term criminal careers or not). In general terms, they did not.<sup>45-46</sup> At the individual level, people's transitions were characterised by contingency, flux, indeterminacy; the power of unpredictable 'critical moments' reigned.<sup>47</sup> We argue that in the context of multiple deprivation where many individuals carry many of the objectively defined risks that might predict criminality, this individual-level, risk factor approach loses its predictive power.

Furthermore, despite differences in background and personal social characteristics virtually all shared a lasting experience of economic marginality. We therefore concluded that we must look to higher level 'public issues' of wider society to explain their collective situation. For these individuals in these locales at this time, broad sweep socio-economic processes of de-industrialisation, the economic dispossession of the traditional working-class, the dismantling of previously effective routes to working-class adulthood, the new vagaries of 'getting by' in the lack of these and the concentration of the hardships of poverty onto these lives, did more to explain their biographical twists, turns and outcomes than did individual level factors, such as the particular choices of the people we interviewed.

To date, this has been the shape and force of our theoretical approach to explaining the transitions of the socially excluded young adults. We have emphasised *macro-level* socio-economic change, as it has impacted at the *micro-level* on the working-class localities in which our research participants live, as the key *social structural* motor of their social exclusion.<sup>48</sup>

As Phil Scraton has pointed out, however, there is some explanatory and social distance between individual lives played out on the streets of the deprived locales of our research sites and the broader, higher level frames of social structure that we have emphasised.<sup>49</sup> Between the broad sweep, *macro-level*

de-industrialisation of working-class communities and the *micro*-level twists and turns of individual biographies sit the numerous *meso*-level institutions of the state and civil society. For socially excluded young adults, critical amongst these are the institutions and agencies of the criminal justice system.

As we have shown in this paper, encounters with these agencies can be experienced in quite different ways by young adults. These encounters can and do have effects. Young people's lives do not roll on to foregone conclusions because of the determining contexts of place, class and history. Biographies are not set in stone because of the chance of being born in hard places at hard times. Life possibilities and room for manoeuvre are constrained and socially structured, certainly, but -- taking the example of young offenders -- we have seen that the criminal justice agencies of police, prison, and probation have the ability to either add to the problems of growing up in poor neighbourhoods and to get in the way of criminal desistance or, alternatively, to help young adults in substantial ways at significant moments to 'grow out of crime' toward more socially included, normal lives.

<sup>1</sup> Concepts such as 'social exclusion' and 'risk' are not unproblematic, hence the inverted commas around them here (see R. MacDonald and J. Marsh, *Disconnected Youth? Growing up in Britain's Poor Neighbourhoods* (Palgrave, 2005). For stylistic reasons, we note this here but do not use inverted commas hereafter.

<sup>2</sup> L. Johnston, R. MacDonald, P. Mason, L. Ridley, and C. Webster, *Snakes & Ladders: Young People, Transitions & Social Exclusion* (Policy Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> R. MacDonald and J. Marsh, *Disconnected Youth? Growing up in Britain's Poor Neighbourhoods* (Palgrave, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> DETR, *Index of Multiple Deprivation* (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> P. Chamberlayne, M. Rustin, and T. Wengraf (eds), *Biography and Social Exclusion in Europe* (Policy Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> D. Byrne, *Social Exclusion* (Open University Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> C. Webster, D. Simpson, R. MacDonald, A. Abbas, M. Cieslik, T. Shildrick and M. Simpson, *Poor Transitions* (Policy Press, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> We are grateful to the ESRC and JRF for funding these studies, to the interviewees who took part and to our co-researchers at Teesside for their part in them: Jane Marsh, Paul Mason, Donald Simpson, Les Johnston, Louise Ridley, Mark Simpson, Andrea Abbas, Mark Cieslik and, particularly, Colin Webster.

<sup>9</sup> M. Simpson, T. Shildrick, R. MacDonald, J. Harrison and A. Abbas, *Evaluation of Hartlepool Dordrecht Project, Final Report* (Youth Research Group, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> R. MacDonald, and J. Marsh, *Disconnected Youth? Growing up in Britain's Poor Neighbourhoods* (Palgrave, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> R. MacDonald, T. Shildrick, C. Webster and M. Simpson, 'Paths of exclusion, inclusion & desistance: understanding marginalized young people's criminal careers' in S. Farrell et al (eds), *Escape Attempts: Contemporary Perspectives on Life After Punishment* (Routledge, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> C. Webster, R. MacDonald and M. Simpson, 'Predicting Criminality? Risk Assessment, Neighbourhood Influence and Desistance' (2006) 6 *Youth Justice* 1.

<sup>13</sup> Whilst it is important to state that these were not statistically representative samples, we can sketch out the *nature* and *shape* of typical criminal careers. The numbers are for qualitative not quantitative argument.

- 14 The young women in the studies told a different story of their criminal and drug-using involvement; of abusive relationships with male partners and family members, of sexual exploitation and street prostitution entwined with 'heavy end' heroin use (see R. MacDonald and J. Marsh, *Disconnected Youth? Growing up in Britain's Poor Neighbourhoods* (Palgrave, 2005).
- 15 J. Macleod, *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations and Attainment in a Local Income Neighbourhood* (Westview Press, 2004).
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- 26 P. Scraton, 'The criminalisation and punishment of children and young people: introduction' (2008) 20 *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 1.
- 27 D. Haydon, and P. Scraton, 'Conflict, regulation and marginalisation in the North of Ireland: the experiences of children and young people' (2008) 20 *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 59.
- 28 L. McAra and S. McVie, 'The usual suspects? Street-life, young people and the police' (2005) 5 *Criminal Justice* 5.
- 29 This is not to argue that participation in 'street corner society' played no role in the formation of criminal careers. It was in virtually all cases a necessary but *not* sufficient condition for the establishment of these. The point is, however, that far more young people engaged in street corner society than went on to develop significant criminal careers.
- 30 Interestingly, violence and bullying were not.
- 31 When Barney was first admitted he only received paracetamol tablets to help with his heroin problem.
- 32 C. Webster and G. Robson, *Needs Assessment of Young Substance Mis-users and Drug Services in Stockton* (Stockton DAT & DPAS, 2002).

- 33 P. Scraton, 'The criminalisation and punishment of children and young people: introduction' (2008) 20 *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 1, at p 9 [emphasis added].
- 34 Haydon and Scraton's analysis (P. Haydon and P. Scraton, 'Conflict, regulation and marginalisation in the North of Ireland: the experiences of children and young people' (2008) 20 *Current Issues in Criminal Justice* 59) of the policing of young people in Northern Ireland bears very many similarities with ours. An interesting difference, perhaps explained by the longer and more explicit politicisation of relations between communities and the police and security services in Northern Ireland, is that their respondents described 'a strong sense of injustice' in their dealings with the police.
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