

Executive summary

The 'state of youth' has become an increasingly popular subject of debate in academic, policy and media circles. Commentators fear that British youth are on the verge of mental breakdown, at risk from antisocial behaviour, self-harm, drug and alcohol abuse. These concerns are, to an extent, borne out in ippr's findings and other research, presented in this report.

Teenage social immobility

Worryingly, a disproportionate number of those committing antisocial acts, becoming teenage parents and consuming drugs and alcohol hail from lower socio-economic groups. Social mobility appears to have stalled: today British young people's futures are more strongly determined by their backgrounds and upbringing than was the case for previous generations. Efforts to encourage young people to stay on in post-16 education seem only to benefit those who would already have been in some form of training or apprenticeship, and do not seem to affect outcomes for the most disadvantaged.

Until now analysis has largely failed to grasp how the experience of youth in Britain has changed and why this has fuelled public disquiet.

The emerging importance of personal and social skills

Social class remains the most powerful explanation of behaviour and outcomes. But young people make and remake their lives within social structures. ippr's research shows that as society has changed radically over the past 30 years, the current conception of what young people need in order to succeed in life (exercising their own 'agency') and the role of the state in supporting them is increasingly anachronistic.

From the post-war period to the mid-1970s, the pathways young people followed from compulsory education to work were relatively straightforward and homogenous. For most, leaving school was swiftly followed by getting a job. Relatively few continued on to higher education – just three per cent in 1950 – but for those that did, relatively stable employment soon followed. But by the end of the 1970s, youth labour markets were collapsing under the pressures of rapid deindustrialisation, it became increasingly difficult to move directly into work, and rising unemployment set school-leavers in direct competition with more experienced workers in the hunt for jobs. Young people were decreasingly able to rely on formal organisational struc-

tures, and more dependent on their own agency and motivation. And once they were in an increasingly service-orientated economy, their personal and social skills became ever more important in determining their success.

Parallel shifts were taking place in the public sector: the education system shrugged off its deterministic view of children's development and began to emphasise choice and personalised learning, and public services – under the banner of New Public Management – became more aligned to responding to 'customer' demands. Across the board, those with good personal and social skills – 'softer' skills – began to outdo their contemporaries.

ippr's research

Our research used two large surveys that followed young people born in 1958 and 1970, and shows that in just over a decade, personal and social skills became 33 times more important in determining relative life chances. At the same time, young people from less affluent backgrounds became less likely than their more fortunate peers to develop these skills. For those born in 1958, the connection between family background, personal and social skills, and success later in life was barely discernible. But for a significant proportion of those born in 1970, social immobility – the passing on of disadvantage through families – was clearly due to the connection between family background and personal and social skills.

Why the disadvantaged in particular have been negatively affected in this way is largely down to socio-economic trends of the past 30 years and their impact on the way young people are socialised in contemporary Britain.

The socialisation gap

Rising income over the past 30 years has created a set of richer parents that are increasingly able to purchase activities and access to institutions that can enhance children's personal and social development. Those in poorer groups are unable to provide similar benefits for their offspring, meaning these children will lose out in relative developmental terms. Better-off children are much more likely to attend constructive, organised or educational activities, which research shows are associated with greater personal and social development, while poorer children are more likely to spend time 'hanging out' with friends or watching TV – activities associated with poorer personal and social development.

Just as important is the growing immersion in consumerism: research now reveals that our teenagers are more immersed and are more brand-aware than those in the US, which has problematic implications for their personal and social development. Their access to advertising is unprecedented, with many children now owning their own televisions, computers

and mobile phones.

Seven- to eleven-year-olds are now worth nearly £20 million a year as consumers and have become an increasingly lucrative target audience for unscrupulous advertisers eager to harness their 'pester power'. Children are also taking greater control over spending decisions, a trend that is encouraged by advertisers and corporations but viewed as unwelcome by many parents.

One persuasive strand of thinking explains the impact of childhood consumerism in terms of its impact on children's perceptions of their identity. The central idea is that children are becoming more dependent on brands to give them a sense of what aspirations, values and possessions are important and acceptable. Brands are beginning to dictate social hierarchies in a way formerly done by communities and parents.

Furthermore, the negative impact of growing childhood consumerism is disproportionately experienced by young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Recent research shows that children from the poorest social groups are the most interested in consumer and materialist concerns.

Children's ever earlier engagement with consumerism is reflected across their lives, as adolescence extends increasingly further into childhood. Contemporary youth live accelerated lives, as physical, emotional and social milestones are passed at younger ages. For example, over the past 50 years, the average age of first sexual intercourse fell from 20 for men and 21 for women in the 1950s to 16 for both by the mid-1990s. Pundits point to the proliferation of sex tips for teenagers in youth magazines and health and beauty spas for young girls as evidence that children are exposed to, and expected to navigate, adult concerns at ever younger ages.

This unmediated interaction with consumerism is likely to play out in other areas too – especially in terms of interaction with peers – as the socialising capacity of many parents and communities has waned.

Changes to families

Research suggests that changes to families, such as more parents working, and rising rates of divorce and single parenthood, have undermined the ability of families to effectively socialise young people.

The research indicates that British children spend more time in the company of peers, and less time with adults and parents, than young people in culturally similar countries. Recent MORI polls have shown children's concerns to include parents not always being there when needed, and not making them feel loved and cared for. Changes to family structures are significant here.

Much recent US research reports a consistent overarching finding that children who grow up in an 'intact, two-parent family' with both biological parents do better on a wide range of outcomes than children who grow up in a single-parent family. While this research may be instinctively difficult

for those on the Left to accept, the British evidence seems to support it.

For example, research shows that, compared to children from 'intact, two-parent families', those living with a single parent at age 16 were by age 30 more likely to, for example, smoke, be a single parent, be in social housing, receive benefits, and be in a workless household.

Evaluations have also suggested that certain relationship support interventions, particularly those involving couple therapy, have led to better school performance and sustained increased involvement by fathers. Further, recent research in the UK using the Millennium Cohort Study has shown that children of cohabiting couples do worse than those of married couples. In response, Cameron's Conservatives are investigating the potential of marriage promotion as part of their Social Justice Policy Review.

But there are problems with this response. For example, the rates of divorce, cohabitation and single-parenthood are trends that are unlikely to reverse. And focusing support on traditional family types, regardless of need, skews resources away from single-parent families, who tend to be most in need of financial support, and is unnecessarily morally prescriptive.

Research using the Millennium Cohort Study also found that marital status matters much less than many other factors in determining whether couples stay together. But ippr's key finding is that children growing up in non-traditional family forms can succeed if warmth, stability and consistent parenting are present. Therefore, rather than penalise single parenthood or cohabitation or attempt unrealistic policies, we should consider how best to support those parents – through the traditional routes of better childcare and more flexible working arrangements as well as increased investment in parenting education, relationship education and support.

Changes to communities

In 2005, low levels of collective efficacy – the ability and willingness of local residents to intervene in youth violence and antisocial behaviour – were strongly related to disadvantage, with people in the most affluent areas more likely to intervene than those in the most deprived areas if they saw children spray-painting graffiti, for example. If this pattern has held over the last few decades, children from more advantaged communities would have experienced greater levels of intervention from their neighbours and other adults than those from more disadvantaged communities. As the impact of communities became more important, this would have meant a growing divide between the socialisation experiences of the best and worst off.

The demographic make-up of communities is also significant. In 2005, people from minority ethnic groups were much less likely to intervene if a child was rude to an adult or if children were spray-painting graffiti, than those from a white background. This highlights the importance of engaging all communities in local issues, particularly given that younger generations

in the UK are much more likely to be from an ethnic minority background than older cohorts.

Overall, the research shows that compared to adults in other countries, adults in Britain are less likely to intervene in youth violence and behaviour and more likely to blame young people for their behaviour.

Rethinking youth policy

Currently, young people who do not have access to the factors that develop their non-cognitive abilities (many of whom come from disadvantaged backgrounds), who have less engaged parents, a less orderly and secure local environment and spend more time with deviant peers or under the unmediated influence of the media, are increasingly vulnerable to failure, while their better socialised peers will increasingly succeed. In response, youth policy needs to be rethought, not simply through focusing education policy on non-cognitive development, but rather with a more fundamental shift in our thinking, as shown in the recommendations below.

Key recommendations

These recommendations complement existing ippr recommendations in the area of childcare provision, parental leave, relationship support and strategies to better engage fathers.

Preventing childhood consumerism through regulating media and marketing

- Commercial television and print media advertising designed to capture the attention of children of primary school age should be proscribed.
- Commercial advertising through mobile phone and 3G platforms to handsets registered to children of primary school age should be similarly proscribed. Parents should have the option of registering phone numbers to ensure this happens.
- Commercial advertising in primary schools and other educational institutions for the primary age group should be monitored by Ofsted.

Reducing teen pregnancy

- Teenagers should be offered a full choice of contraception, including long-lasting forms. Condoms should be widely available at low or no cost, to young people in places used by and accessible to them.
- Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) including sex and relationship education should become a statutory subject in all primary and secondary schools in England and Wales.
- Parents should be supported to develop skills to discuss sex and relationships with their children. Services for parents, including information on parenting and childcare and access to parenting groups, should

be provided through the Extended Schools parenting support core offer.

- Access to support and information for teenage mothers and teenagers who have had abortions should be improved, to tackle the number of teenagers experiencing second pregnancies.

Ensuring fair opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities

- Youth clubs should be vetted to ensure they offer structure and activity within secure environments. Funding should be directed towards long-running activity programmes and regular attendance promoted.
- An element of compulsion should be introduced to young people's participation in structured, positive extra-curricular activities offered as part of the Extended Schools agenda, but within a framework that promotes choice. The proposed activities should be vetted to ensure the activities on offer will benefit the participants.
- Our preferred model would be for young people aged 11 to 14 to participate in a long-term extra-curricular activity, one day a week after school, choosing from options outlined in the *Youth Matters* Green Paper. This would be mandated through an extension of the school day, creating a legal requirement for parents to ensure participation.
- The current Children and Young People's Plans should ensure that every child has the genuine opportunity to participate in a choice of structured, positive activities. This should be done by identifying barriers to participation – such as issues to do with availability, timing and transport – and proposing solutions.

Promoting positive activities through the voluntary sector

- Funding streams should be conditional on activities such as sport, drama, cadets and some forms of vocational activity being structured, regular, and constructive with a clear end goal and clearly defined, hierarchical (though malleable) roles.
- Innovation and start-up funding streams should be made available to develop the facilities and provision of positive activities in areas in which they are not available. In order to achieve this, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) in partnership with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) should map the provision of local services provided through the voluntary sector, to identify gaps in provision.

Extending asset-based welfare, particularly for children in care

- Looked after children, such as those in care, should have their own asset account. This is a complement to ippr's previous recommendation that local authorities should make annual deposits of £50 into the Child Trust Funds of all children in care.

- The account should consist of an initial lump-sum deposit of £200; monthly deposits of £20 plus interest; and a further lump sum of £500 at age 16 to assist with the transition to independent living.
- A proportion each year should be available to be spent on 'treats', with a 'gatekeeper' worker to countersign all withdrawals.
- Larger amounts should be available for expenditure around age 16, to ensure that the asset supports the transition to independent living. The remaining lump sum should be transferred to a young person's Child Trust Fund at age 18, at which point the full amount may be spent in full, without restriction.
- Larger monthly deposits should be used to support out-of-school-hours structured activities.
- Savings made by the young person into the account could be matched in order to further develop self-efficacy and a propensity to plan.

Improving teaching and learning

- Initial teacher training should be reformed to incorporate specialist teaching strands, to enable teachers to respond better to individual pupil needs.
- One of these strands should be pedagogic techniques that improve personal and social skills development and behaviour management, such as the use of group work and peer learning.
- Another specialist strand could build on conflict resolution work currently undertaken by voluntary sector organisations such as Leap. Its in-school programme provides training for staff and young people to develop a peer mediation/education approach to building young people's responsibility and capacity to take action on conflicts that they are involved in.
- Initial teacher training and ongoing professional development for teachers should be reformed to improve skills in a range of pedagogical techniques.
- The curriculum at Key Stage 3 should be made increasingly flexible to allow teachers to personalise learning.
- Ofsted's inspection criteria should be broadened to include criteria related to the teaching of personal and social skills.

Harnessing and shaping peer effects within schools

- Ofsted inspection criteria should be broadened to include assessment of the provision of constructive activities.
- House systems should be introduced or expanded in state schools to encourage students to work collectively towards achievable goals and to break up traditional peer groups and hierarchies within schools.

Improving dissemination of best practice

- DfES should provide an annual report for head teachers of best voluntary sector practice in each area.
- DfES should map the provision of local services provided through the voluntary sector, which would also enable policymakers to identify gaps in provision.
- A National Innovation Start-up Fund should be set up to support the development of charities that work to develop young people's personal and social skills as well as those that intervene in schools to set up conflict resolution schemes.
- DfES should offer to match funding for schools that have employed intervention schemes that have been evaluated to set criteria.

Supporting communities in developing collective efficacy

A further key challenge remains in supporting communities to develop collective efficacy. Research consistently shows that the role of the wider community and other adults in socialising young people remains vital. The main focus here should be on strategies to promote collective efficacy, rather than on merely increasing trust and social capital.

The recommendations outlined above draw on a wide evidence base. More can and should be done in each of these areas – we hope that others will build on our ideas in the light of our analysis.