

Young men, crime & desistance: *hard work in hard times*

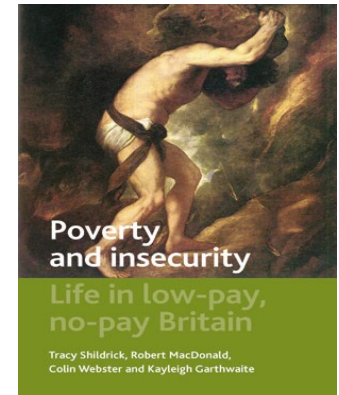
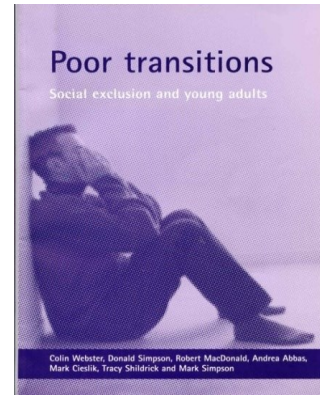
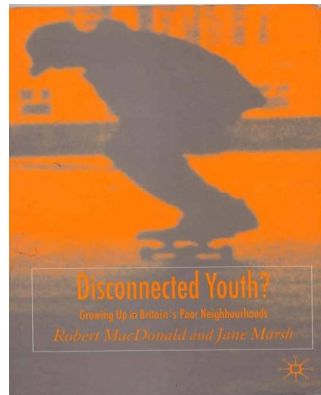
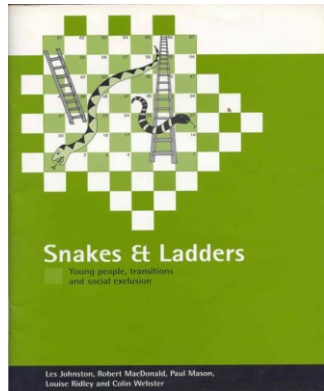
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Aims



- Report qualitative studies with ‘socially excluded’ young men - in some of Britain’s poorest neighbourhoods
- Describe processes of engagement in ‘heavy end’ crime & drug use, as part of wider transitions to adulthood
- Reflect on what we can learn about how/ why some young men can ‘desist’ from this



- 4 studies of youth transitions & social exclusion (fieldwork 1998-2003 – and then 2008/9): ESRC & JRF
- In some of **poorest neighbourhoods in England (Teesside)**
- 186 white, working-class 'hard to reach' young adults
- Also 'stake-holder' interviews + participant observation
- Qualitative, **in-depth, broad-ranging** interviews
 - **education & labour market 'careers'**
 - **housing & family 'careers'**
 - **leisure, criminal, drug using 'careers'**
- **Long-term/longitudinal**, following (some) same individuals **teens to 30s...**
- **ECONOMIC MARGINALITY = MAIN FINDING + CONTEXT**

Explaining these youth transitions... a simple story

- **It's the economy, stupid!**
- Mid-60s = full employment (male, skilled, well-paid)
- 3rd most prosperous sub-region in UK (after London, Aberdeen)
- Massive, rapid deindustrialisation: late 70s-late 1990s = 100K jobs lost (98k jobs 'created' – part-time, service sector, low paid)
- Our cohorts born into this industrial wreckage & transformation - simple story of degraded opportunity structures



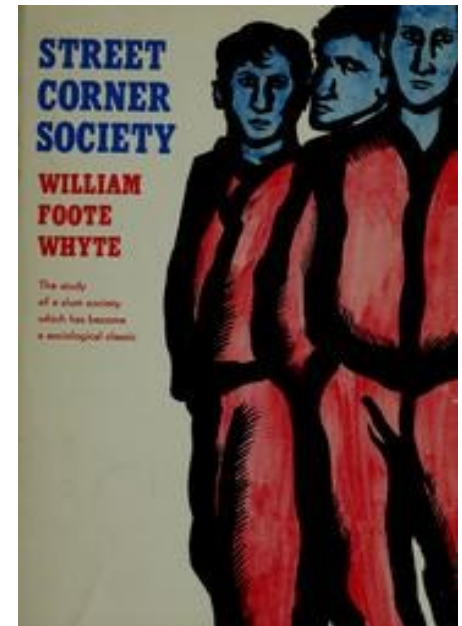
The onset & establishment of criminal careers: Teesside findings in brief



- Early teenage offending = 'normal', brief, petty, short-lived (shop-lifting, under-age drinking/ smoking, vandalism)
- Challenge is to describe the longer-term criminal careers of a minority (c. 40 interviewees)
- **Two processes** in relation to '**school to work**' & '**leisure careers**' = key in shaping male criminal & drug-using careers...

1. School to street...

- School disaffection becomes committed disengagement
- Simultaneous commitment to 'street corner society' (MacDonald & Shildrick, 2007, *Leisure Studies*)
- Truant time (& evenings) spent in (often boring) street corner socialising: 'doing nothing' (Corrigan, *Resistance through Rituals*, 1976)
- Sub-cultural attachment to tight, neighbourhood peer groups
- 'Leisure-time crime', in structure-less, purpose-less days



'Leisure time' crime

- 'I'm not a bad lad, a real thief. I've mooched [stolen from] sheds'...when you pinch summat, like a barbecue set you can sell on for £10, you can buy yourselves a few bottles of cider, can't you? You can cure your boredom then' (Richy, 17, Youth Trainee).
- 'No, not bad crimes, not bad stuff. Just jumping in cars which were nicked. Not nicking them. Just jumping in with the lads for a spin round. Looking back, I can't see why I did it. Daft stuff. Just the buzz. Like these two bottles of pop I nicked – and a can of after-shave – that's my two shoplifting ones. I didn't really need them. I just did it. For the buzz I suppose' (Gazz, 20, YOI inmate).

2. 'Enter the dragon'...

Crime Detection and
Prevention Series
Paper 92

**New Heroin Outbreaks Amongst
Young People in England and Wales**

Howard Parker
Catherine Bury
Roy Egginton

Editor: Barry Webb
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- For a minority of these, a 2nd **key process** was ***move from 'recreational'*** (e.g. cannabis, speed) ***to 'dependent' drug*** use (heroin, crack cocaine)
- **'Second-wave heroin outbreak'** in Teesside as interviewees progressed through mid-teens
- ***'The new heroin users...were basically poor, undereducated, unemployed, 'marginalised' young men'*** (Parker et al, 1998).
- **'Poverty drugs'** appealed to young people with troubled lives; 'blanking out' problems & guilt
- Drug-driven acquisitive crime = frequent, desperate, chaotic

...drug-driven crime

- 'That's the way it goes. Start off smoking a bit of ganga, breaking into cars and pinching car radios and then you end up on heroin and that and it fucks you up' (Jason, 21).
- 'Prior to 16 I'd had a few cautions. It just got worse as I was getting older. I went from E to heroin. I started 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).

Social support, networks & transitions

- Across *all* sample/ aspects of transition - social networks of family & friends shaped destinations
- The *positive* influence of 'bonding social capital' in conditions of objective hardship, e.g.:
 - Informal, word of mouth job-search; inter-generational emotional support; defence against/ redress after crime; child care; loans of money, etc
- But... 'bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves' (Putnam, 2000: 23)
- As years passed, social networks became increasingly narrow, uniform, local. Those with offending histories moved with others the same; allegiances reinforced & closed down 'autobiographic possibilities'.

Criminal careers & social exclusion: 'corkscrew heroin careers'



- Sceptical about the literal fit of 'social exclusion'...
- But, biographical accounts of these young men were those most redolent of deepest 'social exclusion':

family estrangement, homelessness, recurrent/ lasting joblessness, ill-health, bereavements, failed desistance, relapse to heroin, successive imprisonment, *loss, regret, shame.*

Desistance from criminal & drug-using careers

- Yet, *Poor Transitions* study contained surprises
- Apparently sustained, serious (but fragile?) desistance by majority with criminal/ drug-using careers
- Causes/ correlates/ factors in desistance, similar to criminological reports of desistance from UK, US, Aus., NZ:
 - **Parenthood** (new fatherhood)

‘I’ve done every single drug you can name...//...I’ve done heroin as well. I’ve done it all. I stopped because Angela fell pregnant with the baby. So I stopped it because of the baby’ (Curtis, 21).
 - **Partnerships** (new, loving, trusting, ‘straight’ partners)
 - **Employment** (i.e. insecure ‘poor work’ typical of samples)

Other aids to desistance, from our studies: drug treatment/ housing moves/ peers

- Speedy access to reliable, therapeutic, non-punitive drug **treatment** (rare locally at the time of study)
- **Housing moves** away from home neighbourhood (sometimes allied with new partnerships)
- **Disconnecting from friendship groups/** masculine sub-culture of 'the street' = fundamental to 'going straight'
- These reinforced ways of being/ identity that underwrote drugs-crime.
- Prison preferred over probation; to get clean, to get 'away'
- '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).

How to understand young men's desistance from crime? Narratives of change

- Why did some persist?
- Why desistance *now*, for others?
- Why do some '*want to change*'?
- [Difficult to disentangle cause/ effect]
- Impact of **critical moments** in narratives of change
 - (Johnston, 2000, Thomson et al 2002, MacDonald & Shildrick 2013)
 - e.g. parental separation, violence, housing moves, family revelations, illness, bereavement, interventions by professionals
 - '**fateful moments**' (Giddens 1991) '**turning points**' (Hodkinson & Sparkes 1997), '**wake-up times**' (Williamson 2004)
- Unpredictable in their occurrence **and** consequences: for and against desistance

The power of autobiography (Maruna, 2001)

- The persistent offenders/ '**condemnation scripts**' = a sense of being doomed or fated to their situation in life; crime as a way of getting by.
- Desisters/ '**redemption scripts**' = being able to make sense of the criminal past and project into a positive, 'straight' future
- Yes ... + the importance of '**purposeful activity**' (e.g. *doing*/ being a 'good dad', 'a good employee/ student/ youth worker'...)



...Desistance: hard work in hard times

- ... hard to maintain this 'script', this narrative, this activity
- Normal aspects of 'transition to adulthood' – **i.e. job, parenthood, partnership** – difficult for men with 'spoiled identities': unattractive as partners, fathers, employees
- Local, multi-agency crime reduction project showed importance of broad **package of social support** is critical (e.g. **supported tenancies, employment, training, welfare benefits etc**)
- ***But all massively cut***, in name of austerity ('even' for non-offenders)



'...It does me head in just wandering around'

- Purposeful activity & positive identify to replace/ 'smother' the temptation of crime-drugs & the drift back...



'It's 'cos I don't occupy myself. No job to keep me busy. It does me head in just wandering around. Nothing to do. I end up knocking around with me old mates. I just get back into it. I don't have enough to do. I just hang around here. Play pool. ***I need more purpose.*** I want to go to college. I wish it would come around quicker'

(Richard, 23, explaining heroin relapses...)

Governments make crime more likely... a literature review (Kingston & Webster, 2015).

- Relentless public policy 'reform' since the 1970s *has systematically worsened the social & economic conditions of (already) poor, single young men*: 'the most undeserving poor'
- ... And this is the socio-demographic group most prone to victimisation/ offending ('volume crimes')/ criminalisation
- 'policies have exposed them to criminal temptations & opportunities that might otherwise not have existed. Instead of preventing and alleviating their poverty, policies have hastened and deepened it' (p.223)

Conclusions:

‘biography & social structure’ (CW Mills again!)

- Cannot understand young men’s *criminal careers* – nor their *desistance from crime* – without understanding:
 - wider aspects of transition to adulthood (e.g. becoming a parent, employment, partnerships)
 - or the social, economic, political context of those transitions (e.g. how policies improve or reduce prospects for poor WC young men, e.g. impact of drug markets)
- ‘Critical moments’ & autobiographical possibilities seem important in shaping prospects for desistance
- ‘Wanting to change’ is only a 1st step – a social structure of opportunities then available to *enable* that process of desistance & narrative re-orientation is crucial

Thank you for listening!

