

Turning 21

Life chances and uncertain transitions

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Traditionally, the transition from school to work has been important for young adults, and turning 21 was recognised as the marker of adulthood in Australia, when young people had jobs—and even families of their own. Social and economic changes over the past 30 years or so have made the transition from school to work more complex and less clear-cut. This report documents the factors that shape the lives of 123 young participants in the Life Chances Study, as they turn 21.

Key points

- **Stereotypes about young people obscure the diverse and complex lives of 21-year-olds.** This diversity is shaped by family income, gender, ethnic background and resources. The 21-year-olds included university and TAFE students, full-time and part-time workers, young parents and jobseekers. Many were both studying and working.
- **Those with fewer resources were more likely to identify as adults.** They faced challenges that those with more resources could avoid. While some welcomed adulthood, others felt the burden of responsibilities.
- **21-year-olds continued to rely on their families for advice, and emotional and financial support.** The unequal access to resources reinforced inequalities because even though most had jobs, many still relied on their parents' financial support—if they could.
- **Disadvantage need not be intergenerational.** Disadvantage or advantage persisted for some families, but not for all. Childhood in a low-income family did not necessarily condemn children to continuing disadvantage.
- **Definitions of a 'successful' transition must take into account young people's multiple activities and their wellbeing.** Most 21-year-olds aspired to full-time employment. In this study, most of those who did not have a job and were not studying or in training had caring duties or mental health issues. Labelling these young people as 'disengaged' does not sufficiently capture their level of activity or wellbeing.
- **Transitions for 21-year-olds are uncertain, but the social and economic resources needed to address this uncertainty are not evenly distributed.** Those from high-income backgrounds with strong social supports had greater 'choice' while negotiating their pathways than those from lower income backgrounds.
- **Policies need to address multidimensional disadvantage.** The findings have implications for addressing socioeconomic inequalities as well as for targeted career and vocational guidance.

Background

The Life Chances Study is a unique longitudinal study initiated by the Brotherhood of St Laurence in 1990 to explore the impacts of family income and associated factors on children over time. It commenced as a study of 167 infants born in inner Melbourne and has followed the families as they have moved elsewhere.

In stage 10 of the study we surveyed 123 young people and their parents to see how they were dealing with the important transitions towards adulthood. We also undertook 25 interviews to explore their situations in more depth.

The research

Family background and reflections on growing up

Family income: The 123 young people fell into three family income categories: 25 per cent low income, 35 per cent medium income and 40 per cent high income. There was both continuity and change over the 21 years: over half (58%) of the families who had been on low incomes at the start of the study were still in the low income group 21 years later; over a third (38%) of medium income families were still in this category; and 70 per cent of those who started on high incomes remained on high incomes.

The young people generally told positive stories about the impact of their family finances, with some from all income groups saying it had little effect on their growing up. Some who had deprived childhoods told how they had learned from this how to manage money carefully or become independent. However, closer attention suggested that they struggled to appear ‘not bothered’ by missing out as children.

Ethnic background: Young people who were not of ‘Anglo-Australian’ background were very aware of their ethnicity, while Anglo-Australians were not. Some from Asian and Middle Eastern backgrounds felt the pressure of being ‘different’ at school or at work and also of managing study and family obligations.

A profile of the 21-year-olds

What were the 21-year-olds doing? Most of the 123 young people were studying and/or working. Many combined several activities, including studying, working and looking for work. The four categories of main activity were: university (50%), TAFE (10%), full-time employment (27%) and ‘other’ (13%). The ‘other’ group included those looking for work and those not in the workforce because of childcare responsibilities or illness.

Health and wellbeing: While most of the 21-year-olds reported good health and satisfaction with their lives, 19 per cent reported recent mental health problems, mainly anxiety and depression. Most said that they would turn to parents or friends for help if needed, while a few had used support services such as counselling, with mixed results.

Financial support: Eighty per cent of the 21-year-olds earned some wages, often from part-time work as they studied. A third (34%) said they received financial assistance from their parents and almost a third (32%) received income support from Centrelink (mainly

Youth Allowance and Newstart Allowance). While the majority said they had enough money for their needs, fewer young people from low-income families (52%) than high-income families (75%) said this. Expenses also differed according to family income: young people from low-income families were more likely to name rent and study costs among their largest expenses, while those from high-income families were more likely to name entertainment and holidays. Those from low-income families were much less likely to receive financial assistance from their parents and were more likely to be helping their parents financially:

So most of my pay goes towards my parents and then sometimes I just get money off them ... I pay the bills and my other living expenses, which includes theirs as well, and we don't have enough for that.

Living arrangements: Almost three-quarters (72%) were living with their parents. The two main reasons given by those living with their parents were convenience and comfort (83%) and financial reasons (73%). Lack of affordable accommodation was an issue both for students and low-wage workers. Housing difficulties, such as poor quality accommodation, high rents and insecure tenure interacted with other disadvantages and affected young people's education, employment and wellbeing. For example:

Melissa was a young student living with her mother and younger sister in private rental. Lack of space in the home combined with Melissa's late work hours caused issues that were further compounded by lack of soundproofing and complaints from a neighbour. Her movement within the house was restricted and she spent a lot of time in her bedroom; and she was not eating properly. Financial difficulties meant that she and her mother struggled to pay rent but could not afford to move. Melissa also could not afford the time or money to socialise with her friends.

Adult at 21? Asked whether they had reached adulthood at 21, 38 per cent replied ‘yes’, 49 per cent ‘yes and no’ and 13 per cent ‘no’. There was a push and pull between independence and dependence, as many young people experienced prolonged education and extended periods of financial dependence on parents. Some from disadvantaged backgrounds had no choice but to undertake the responsibilities associated with adulthood. These young people included some early school leavers, young parents and some from low-income families, particularly those who were providing assistance to a sole parent.

Transitions and pathways

The 'ideal' pathway: Most Life Chances participants aspired to full-time employment. While 27 per cent had full-time jobs, most were still in transition, studying or looking for work. For some, their current employment was a means to further education or a better job; and some who were working full-time took up training and development opportunities through their employer. Some students were taking a pathway via TAFE to university. Whether these pathways lead to meaningful work remains to be seen.

Uncertain transitions: Many young people were caught between the shifting demands of a precarious labour market and the requirements of education and training, so that their transitions to full-time work were likely to be prolonged. However, those from higher income families with strong social networks were more able to exercise 'choice' and flexibility. For other 21-year-olds, detours and shifts in their pathways were more precarious, as plans were made in 'risky' contexts.

Pathway supports to work: In their transition to work young people sought support from informal social networks of family and friends and from employment agencies. However, they often found a disjuncture between their own aspirations, their qualifications and their advisors' knowledge of changes in the labour market. In the absence of effective supports, several 21-year-olds, particularly early school leavers, were bearing the burden of risks in training and work as individuals. One young woman described seeking assistance:

They just like to act as if they care about what you want and they would interview you and ask you about what sort of jobs you're looking for, but in the end they just refer any sort of jobs to you, like rubbish jobs.

Experiences of tertiary education: University students from low-income families received financial support from the Commonwealth Government through HECS and Youth Allowance. Although this was appreciated, it was not enough for some students without additional family support. TAFE provided important access to qualifications. For both university and TAFE students, costs of fees and study resources were factors in limiting their choice of courses. Once students enrolled, the daily costs of food and travel were a problem, as well as long travel times and the demands of necessary part-time work, which prevented regular attendance and adequate study time. Some young people also experienced difficulties studying at home and had little contact with teaching staff.

Balance and wellbeing: The individual stories showed the struggles of balancing competing priorities of study, work and family commitments. Combining study and work was common for students across the income groups, but proved more difficult for those from low-income families, particularly for those in casual employment, as they had to balance employers' demands for flexibility with their own need to study:

Casual employment is unstable—shifts get cancelled and you get sent home if it is quiet [in hospitality]. It can be tricky to earn enough money when you don't have flexible availability due to study.

Difficulties in balancing priorities could strain relationships with families they were trying to support. Young parents were caught in the 'double bind' of trying to meet their children's immediate needs and to study to meet their future needs.

Wellbeing and the 21-year-olds' pathways: While full-time work is one 'outcome' of a youth transition, a 'good' outcome also needs to include the wellbeing of the young person. Examples of good outcomes included two young women who had taken different pathways (an early school leaver and a graduate) who were working full-time and enjoying their lives. An example of a 'poor' outcome was a young man who was neither working nor studying, and had mental health problems. For some of the young parents and some of those on long-term holidays, volunteering or developing alternative careers, 'work or study' does not seem the most appropriate indicator of a 'successful' transition at this stage. The findings suggest also a category of 'uncertain' outcomes, including students with courses on hold and new graduates unable to find employment in their area of expertise.

Intergenerational disadvantage: The findings highlight the importance of young people's birth families, both during their childhood and in their current lives as 21-year-olds. Two key aspects are the family's financial situation and ethnic background. However, while family background matters, it is only one factor in the 21-year-olds' lives. Disadvantage is not predetermined and policy makers should assume neither that those on low incomes will always stay that way, nor that any individual can improve his or her financial situation unaided.

Multigenerational disadvantage: Young people from low-income families experienced the interaction of financial stress with housing problems, stressful family relationships and employment pressures. In turn, this affected their ability to study or to complete courses,

and impacted on their health and wellbeing. To provide relevant support for young people facing multiple disadvantages a holistic approach is needed.

Implications for policy

Improving adequacy of income support: There is a strong case to increase the levels of Youth Allowance and Newstart Allowance. Additionally, Centrelink staff need to better engage young people.

Supporting low-income students at university: Universities need to consider the barriers posed to students by the costs of transport, textbooks, other resources and on-campus costs, as well as (for some) the travel time. Wide-ranging careers advice is needed for new graduates, as well as for those changing courses mid stream.

Promoting TAFE opportunities: A high priority should be the continued funding of high quality public TAFEs, including skilled student counselling services. Fees and other costs should be reduced for students from low-income backgrounds. Subsidised fees should not be limited to qualifications higher than those already gained.

Increasing transition support: Young people not engaged in study need access to independent careers advice and support to explore their work and study options. Accessible support services are needed that can take into account the diverse and interacting needs of young people, including mental health needs and special learning needs.

Improving workforce experience: To improve the experience of employment for young people, such as those in our study, more support is needed by employers for training young people within the workforce. Increased attention should be given to more sustainable rather than casual jobs for young people.

About the project

We are most grateful to the Prue Myer Fund, which has supported stage 10 of the study. We also acknowledge the generous support from the Bokhara Foundation and other funders who have contributed to earlier stages of the study.

For further information

The full report, *Turning 21: Life chances and uncertain transitions* (PDF file, 558 KB) by Janet Taylor, Joseph Borlagdan and Malita Allan, may be downloaded from the Brotherhood of St Laurence website.

Earlier reports also available on the website include:

Turning 18: pathways and plans (Taylor & Gee 2010)

Stories of early school leaving: pointers for policy and practice (Taylor 2009)

Life chances at 16: Life Chances Study stage 8 (Taylor & Nelms 2008)

School engagement and life chances: 15 year olds in transition (Taylor & Nelms 2006)

Information about the DVD *Life Chances: Turning 13, turning 18* is also available.

For other relevant Brotherhood publications see www.bsl.org.au/Publications.

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