

Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training

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Introduction

Young people who are not in full-time education, employment or training (NEET) are the subject of continuing policy concern. The Scottish Executive is committed to reducing their numbers, to extending their opportunities for education or training and to improving support services. It is believed that many young people who are NEET are from disadvantaged backgrounds and experience disadvantage in later life. However little research on the problem has been conducted in Scotland. This *Briefing* summarises a study which used the Scottish School Leavers Survey (SSLS) to examine the number, backgrounds and activities of NEET young people in the late 1990s.

Key findings

- ❑ More than three in ten (31%) young people were NEET at some time during the three years after the end of compulsory schooling. More than half of these were unemployed. The proportion who were NEET at any one time varied from 5% to 16%.
- ❑ One in five was NEET on a narrower definition which includes only those who were unemployed, sick or disabled, or looking after a child or the home.
- ❑ On average NEET young people had lower S4 attainments, had truanted more and had less favourable attitudes to school.
- ❑ Young people who were unemployed or looking after child or home tended to have less advantaged social and educational backgrounds, to be NEET for longer, and to be vulnerable to further spells of NEET. Other NEET activities such as travelling or taking a long holiday, voluntary work and part-time jobs were not associated with disadvantaged backgrounds or with an increased chance of further NEET spells.
- ❑ Despite better average qualifications and higher participation in education, females remained NEET for longer, and a gender gap opened up as the cohort grew older. More females looked after child or home, or took part-time jobs, but fewer were unemployed.
- ❑ Between four-tenths and two-thirds of young people who were NEET at a given time point were still NEET six months later. Relatively few entered Skillseekers.
- ❑ Different NEET statuses require different policy solutions. Some young people freely choose their NEET activity and require no policy intervention. However, for many young people being NEET is part of a wider pattern of disadvantage and powerlessness, which may need to be tackled on a broader front.

Background

Young people who are NEET are the subject of continuing policy concern. The Scottish Executive's Social Justice strategy aims to halve the proportion of 16-19 year-olds who are NEET (Scottish Executive, 2000). A reduction in this proportion is one of six 'high-level indicators' to assess the progress of the Executive's lifelong learning strategy (Scottish Executive, 2003) and it is included in the strategic priorities for Careers Scotland. Young people under 18 who are not employed or in full-time education or training have, for many years, been guaranteed a place on a Skillseekers training programme. The Executive aims to enhance participation in learning by introducing Education Maintenance Allowances across Scotland, by 're-engineering' Skillseekers and introducing pre-apprenticeships, and through various other measures including those recommended by the Beattie Report to support young people who require additional support to make a successful transition to further education, training or employment (Scottish Executive, 1999).

Reflecting these policy concerns, in 2000 the Scottish Executive Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Department commissioned the Centre for Educational Sociology at the University of Edinburgh to analyse the Scottish School Leavers' Survey (SSLS), to see what it could reveal about the number, backgrounds and activities of NEET young people in Scotland in the late 1990s. The full report of the study was submitted to the Executive in December 2000 (Croxford and Raffe, 2000); we are issuing this Briefing now in order to give wider publicity to the findings, which are relevant to the continuing policy interest in NEET young people.

At least two interpretations of NEET status are possible. In the more benign view it is the product of individual choice and opportunity. It is a largely short-term phenomenon, comprising brief intervals between other statuses, the result of young people's willingness to sample jobs and courses and to experiment with less conventional itineraries after leaving school. It reflects wider trends towards more individualised and less linear pathways from education to work, and towards more flexible education systems and labour markets. In the less favourable interpretation NEET status reflects disadvantage and powerlessness. It is the product of constraint or lack of opportunity, and socially or educationally disadvantaged young people are most affected. Being NEET is a negative experience which may make disadvantage cumulative and lead to future unemployment and social exclusion.

Which interpretation better describes NEET young people in Scotland? Hitherto there has been insufficient evidence with which to answer this question. Studies in other parts of the UK in the 1990s have produced divergent estimates of the number of young people who are NEET and of the consequences of NEET status for those affected (Istance *et al.*, 1994; Armstrong, 1996; Payne, 2000). Recent research projects have examined the destinations of Scottish school leavers, including studies of low attainers and early leavers based on SSLS data (Biggart, 2000; Howieson *et al.*, 2000). However none has focused specifically on NEET young people in Scotland.

This study analysed SSLS data to ask four main questions:

- How many young people were NEET during the first three years after compulsory education? What were they doing?
- What had they done before they became NEET, and what did they do afterwards?
- Which types of young people, from which social and educational backgrounds, were most likely to be NEET?
- Does NEET status lead to future disadvantage?

The Scottish School Leavers Survey

The SSLS is a regular postal survey, funded by the Scottish Executive and conducted for most of the 1990s by the National Centre for Social Research. In the late 1990s, the period covered by this survey, it followed school year groups over the three years following compulsory education. Young people in fourth year (S4) in a given session were surveyed in the following spring, at age 16/17, and again after a further two years, at age 18/19. A further sweep was planned after a further four years, at age 22/23, but our study was carried out before this could take place. The samples are nationally representative and cover all secondary schools in Scotland except special schools.

We use data on two school year groups:

- Cohort 1: young people in S4 in 1995/96. A 10% sample was surveyed in Spring 1997 and in Spring 1999; 68% responded to the first sweep and 39% responded to both sweeps.
- Cohort 2: young people in S4 in 1997/98. A 20% sample was surveyed in Spring 1999, with a response rate of 63%. The cohort was surveyed again in Spring 2001, but this analysis was carried out before then.

Most of our analyses are based on Cohort 1, as this covers a longer age span.

Sample members were asked to indicate their 'main activity' at each October and each May (or spring survey date) between the end of S4 and the time of the survey. Thus Cohort 1 reported on six twice-yearly time points, from October 1996 to Spring 1999, which covered the three years after S4. Cohort 2 reported on two time points, October 1998 and Spring 1999, which cover the first year after S4. Those who reported an activity other than full-time employment, full-time education or Skillseekers training are considered to be NEET at the relevant time point.

The survey data may under-estimate the number of NEET young people. This is because:

- Leavers from special schools, who may be at greater risk of becoming NEET, are not included.
- Young people at greatest risk of being NEET may have been less likely to respond to the survey. Weights compensate for some factors associated with non-response, but may not fully correct the bias.

- NEET statuses such as unemployment tend to be under-recorded in retrospective survey questions.
- Spells of NEET status which began and ended between two of the twice-yearly time points are not recorded.
- For Cohort 1 there is missing information on the early destinations of many leavers from S4 or winter S5.

More details of the data and the analyses are given in Croxford and Raffe (2000).

How many young people were NEET, and what were they doing?

Just over three in ten (31%) of Cohort 1 reported being NEET at one or more time points during the three post-S4 years (see Table 1). The percentage who were NEET was slightly higher among females (32%) than among males (30%). Gender differences are more evident when we examine the main activities of NEET young people. The most common 'activity' was unemployment. Of those who were ever NEET, two in three males and one in two females were unemployed at some point. The next most frequent activity was part-time study or (more usually) work, which accounted for more females than males. Seven per cent of females in the cohort, but none of the males, looked after a child, the family or the home. A number of young people reported travelling or taking long holidays, and a few others were sick or disabled or doing voluntary work. Three per cent of the cohort reported another NEET experience; they may include a few early participants on the New Deal. Some young people reported more than one NEET activity over the different time points, usually involving unemployment and another NEET status. More than four in ten of those who had looked after child or home, more than a third of the 'others' and more than a quarter of those who were sick or disabled had also reported being unemployed.

Table 1: Experience of NEET activities

Percentage of Cohort 1 who were ever:	All	Males	Females
Unemployed ('out of work and looking for a job')	18	20	16
Looking after child/family/home	4	0	7
Sick or disabled	1	0	1
Part-time job or course	7	6	9
Voluntary work	1	0	1
Travelling/long holiday (not paid leave)	3	4	3
Other NEET experience	3	3	3
Any NEET experience	31	30	32
Narrow definition of NEET (unemployed, sick, child/family)	20	20	21
Unweighted n	(2489)	(1033)	(1456)

Note. Some young people reported different NEET activities at different time points.

In the less favourable view of NEET status, described above, it is the product of constraint or lack of opportunity. The SSLS did not directly ask NEET sample members if this was true in their case. However some NEET activities – such as travelling, voluntary work and possibly working part-time – are more likely to have been freely chosen. If we define NEET young people more narrowly, to include only those who were unemployed, looking after a child or family, or sick or disabled, we find that 20% of sample members were NEET at some time during the three post-compulsory years. Once again, the figure is slightly higher for females than for males: 21% compared with 20%.

Movements in and out of NEET status

The number of twice-yearly time points for which a NEET activity was recorded provides a rough measure of the total duration of NEET status. More than half the members of Cohort 1 who had been NEET during the three post-S4 years were NEET at only one time point. The longest durations of NEET status were associated with looking after children or home, followed by unemployment. Shorter durations were associated with travel, part-time jobs and voluntary work.

The proportion of Cohort 1 members who were NEET varied from around 5% to at least 16% across the six time points. (It varied from 4% to 12% if we use the narrower definition described above.) It tended to increase over the three years, but this upward trend was not continuous. For example, the proportion of NEET young people reached a temporary peak near the end of the second post-compulsory year, apparently swollen by school students dropping out from S6. A majority of young people who were NEET at each time point had either been NEET or in full-time education at the previous time point, but a significant minority, up to a third, had been in jobs some six months earlier.

Up to two-thirds of young people who were NEET at a given time point were still NEET at the next time point. A majority of those who left NEET status entered employment, although several entered full-time education, especially the 'S6 dropouts'. For most time points described by the survey the cohort members were still under 18, and therefore covered by the Youth Training Guarantee.

However, relatively few young people left NEET status for Skillseekers placements. During the first year after S4, one in five of young people who were NEET at each time point were in Skillseekers at the following time point, but a slightly higher proportion were in non-Skillseekers jobs. After the first post-S4 year few NEET young people entered Skillseekers.

Who became NEET?

Of young people who were NEET at each time point, more females than males were still NEET at the following time point. As Cohort 1 grew older a gender gap emerged, with higher levels of NEET status among females. This was despite their higher average attainments and levels of participation in education. These differences partly reflected the different activities of males and females who were NEET.

NEET status was associated with several aspects of educational and social disadvantage. Other things being equal, members of Cohort 2 were more likely to be NEET at age 16/17 if:

- they had low Standard Grade attainment in S4;
- they were female;
- they had been serious truants in S4;
- their fathers were in manual occupations or did not report a classifiable occupation;
- at least one parent was unemployed; or
- they lived in a rented home.

Factors *not* associated with NEET status, once other factors are taken into account, included:

- having a lone parent;
- area deprivation; and
- the local unemployment rate.

Any effect of these factors was mediated through other variables such as poor Standard Grades or parental unemployment.

NEET members of Cohort 2 had less favourable attitudes towards school than other young people. Most of those who left after S4 said they had had enough of school. However these questions were asked retrospectively, and may be influenced by young people's experience of being NEET after leaving school.

Our analysis of Cohort 1 covered a longer age span but reached similar conclusions. Socially and educationally disadvantaged young people were more likely to be NEET, and they tended to remain NEET for longer. Young people who were unemployed, looking after child or home or in 'other' NEET activities were the most socially and educationally disadvantaged; those in part-time jobs or courses were more representative of the cohort as a whole, and those who travelled or took a long holiday tended to be more socially and educationally advantaged than average.

Does NEET status lead to future disadvantage?

We found little evidence that NEET young people belonged to a counter-culture which rejected conventional values and norms. At age 16/17, fewer members of Cohort 2 who were NEET aspired to a university degree – realistically, given their low average qualifications – and fewer said they would 'just wait and see where I end up'. In all other respects their plans and aspirations for education, employment and family life were almost identical to those of their peers. More than four in five were looking for a job or Skillseekers placement, and more than three in five had tried to get a job during the previous four weeks. Only one in five expected to be NEET in a year's time.

Did the experience of being NEET make it harder for them to realise their aspirations? Even for Cohort 1 our data only extend to age 18/19. Young people who had been NEET at an earlier time point were

much more likely to be NEET at age 18/19 than those who had not: 41% compared with 7% (Table 2). The proportion was highest for those who had been looking after a child or home (90%) or sick or disabled (81%).

There are two ways in which earlier NEET experience made young people more likely to be NEET at a later time point. The first is through the continuity of a single NEET spell. For many young people, and especially for the long-term sick or those with family responsibilities, a spell of being NEET could continue for a long time.

Second, young people who had had an earlier NEET spell were more likely to re-enter NEET status even having once escaped from it. The second column of Table 2 is based on those who were not NEET at the immediately preceding time point; it thus discounts continuous NEET spells. The chance of moving into a NEET status between October 1998 and Spring 1999 was more than twice as high among those with an earlier but completed NEET spell as among those who had never been NEET: 18% compared with 7%. This 'scarring effect' was greatest among those who had been unemployed, followed by the 'other' category. On the other hand, young people who had had part-time jobs or courses, or who had travelled or taken a long holiday, were at no greater risk of a future NEET spell than young people who had never been NEET.

Table 2: Percentage NEET in Spring 1999 (age 18/19) by previous NEET experience (Cohort 1: percentages)

	% of all	% of all not NEET in October 1998	Unweighted n (=100%)
No previous NEET	7	7	1943/1943
NEET at earlier time point	41	18	540/299
Of whom:			
Unemployed	47	28	237/124
Sick/disabled	81	*	14/1
Looking after child/home	90	*	49/6
Travel/long holiday	13	2	87/55
Part-time job or course	33	4	149/87
'Other'	36	15	49/33

Note. Column 1 shows the percentage NEET at time point 6 among those who were/were not NEET at time points 1-5. Column 2 shows the percentage NEET at time point 6 among those who were/were not NEET at time points 1-4 and were not NEET at time point 5. Percentages based on fewer than 10 sample members (including those for young people who had done voluntary work) are not shown.

Discussion

Earlier we described two interpretations of NEET status, a benign one and a less favourable one. Our evidence suggests that both interpretations are valid to some extent, but the less favourable one applies in the larger number of cases. For many young people being NEET is associated with a background of educational and social disadvantage and it seems likely to contribute to future disadvantage. However, this group varies in the degree of disadvantage suffered; and for others, the

experience of being NEET is neither associated with a disadvantaged background nor does it lead to future disadvantage. Our data only follow young people as far as 18/19 years, so we cannot describe the longer-term outcomes of NEET status. An analysis of the British 1970 birth cohort survey found that NEET status at age 16-18 had a significant negative impact on employment outcomes at age 21 (Bynner and Parsons, 2002). Further research, including analyses of the SSLS follow-up surveys, is needed to show if these findings apply to Scotland and to more recent cohorts.

A majority of NEET young people are unemployed, but others are engaged in a range of different activities, and the two interpretations of NEET status correspond, in part, to these activities. Young people doing voluntary work, travelling or taking long holidays, and at least some of those taking part-time jobs or courses, come from more advantaged backgrounds and appear to be taking relatively brief and more or less planned breaks in their educational or labour-market careers. Young people who are unemployed, looking after child or home, or engaged in 'other' NEET activities tend to be drawn from more disadvantaged social and educational backgrounds, to be NEET for longer, and to be more vulnerable to further spells of NEET. However even this group is heterogeneous: many young people leave unemployment fairly quickly and do not return; others show signs of being caught in a vicious circle of disadvantage and powerlessness.

Implications for policy and practice

Our research provides a number of pointers for future policy.

- NEET young people are a diverse group. Treating them as a single category, merely on the basis of what they are not (ie in education, employment or training), may not be the best basis for forming policy and for setting policy targets.
- Policies need to take account of the different activities of NEET young people. Those with children or domestic responsibilities are likely to require different forms of support from those who are unemployed. Some unemployed young people move into stable employment much more easily than others. And although young people in part-time jobs appear to be in less need of support, there may be a case for helping those who so wish to use their part-time jobs as a springboard to full-time employment.
- Some NEET young people are taking planned breaks in their educational or labour-market careers, and there seems to be little point in including them in indicators of a policy 'problem'. The same is true for most of those who are in part-time jobs. 'S6 dropouts' may be of concern for other reasons, but they appear to suffer no longer-term disadvantage.
- That said, many NEET experiences are negative and may have harmful consequences, and they are often linked with a wider pattern of social disadvantage and powerlessness. This suggests that the problem should be tackled as part of wider strategies for social inclusion and empowerment.
- Policies need to take account of the differences between males and females in the incidence and experience of NEET. Indicators should be expressed separately for males and females.

- Young people who have been disaffected, played truant or achieved low school qualifications are at greatest risk of becoming NEET. Measures to make school more attractive, to increase attendance and to boost attainment may help young people to avoid becoming NEET later on. These factors also provide a means for identifying young people 'at-risk' and for targeting interventions.
- Careers Scotland should identify and track those young people leaving NEET status who are at most risk of re-entering it, in order to provide continuing support.
- Area factors do not directly influence 16-17 year olds' chances of being NEET. Area-based interventions may only be effective to the extent that they influence individual-level variables such as educational attainment and parental unemployment.
- Most NEET young people want full-time jobs and are actively seeking them. An employment-based strategy, to help them to find jobs or the qualifications for jobs, would respond to these aspirations.
- Skillseekers recruitment appears to be targeted on current school leavers rather than on former leavers who have become NEET. Relatively few NEET young people enter Skillseekers. We do not know if this is because they are not offered any placements or because they reject those that they are offered. Possibly the placements available to NEET young people are the less attractive ones, for example not offering employed status.
- There is a need for further research, especially into the different categories of NEET experience, changing patterns of NEET as the cohort grows older, and the longer term consequences of NEET status.

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