

Unemployment: The Hidden Impact

The recent report* from the ESRI on transitions to adulthood among Irish Youth is disturbing. It identifies the breakdown in patterns of living caused by a number of factors but particularly by unemployment. The report first of all describes the normal events marking the transition from youth to adulthood. The first stage involves leaving school and getting a job. The second stage is moving out, though it is unusual to move out if employed locally. The third stage is marriage after some stability of employment has been achieved. The fourth is starting a family of one's own after marriage. This sequence of events would be regarded in Ireland as a successful tradition to adulthood.

Getting employment is a crucial stage in this transition to adulthood. Getting a job gives people financial independence and status. Being unemployed prevents people being able to move out of the family home, or forces them to return to it. In one particular group of young people studied, 50 per cent of those employed had left home, whereas only 30 per cent of those who were unemployed had done so. One group who feel particularly trapped and show high levels of distress are unemployed people who have never lived outside the family home.

Another disturbing finding about unemployment is that generally, as the proportion of time spent unemployed rises, so do rates of premarital pregnancy, marriage, and fertility within marriage; and this is particularly concentrated among those who have spent almost all their time since leaving school unemployed. This obviously will create a spiral of disadvantage if nothing is done to counteract it.

The ESRI Report employs the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) to measure the psychological distress experienced by people in a variety of disadvantaged situations, particularly unemployment. This questionnaire asks such questions as, have you recently been feeling more than usually unhappy or depressed, or been thinking of yourself as a worthless person, or lost much sleep over worrying, or feeling that you are playing

a useful part in things. International studies suggest that any respondent exhibiting more than two symptoms is more than likely to be independently assessed by a psychiatrist as ill. While about 7 per cent of employed people are in this category, in the case of unemployed people who have recently held a job the percentage rises to 36.6 per cent. This suggests that about a third of unemployed people are made mentally ill by the experience of unemployment. The item in the questionnaire which distinguishes most clearly between employed and unemployed is the response to the question, Do you feel you are playing a useful part in things? This research contrasts starkly with the common middle-class perception that the unemployed are having a great time at their expense.

It may be thought that the common experience of unemployment would create some kind of community. This may be true, but the ESRI research shows that among young people at least the overall effect of being in a high unemployment peer group is to raise levels of distress. Those suffering most from unemployment are those whose friends are generally unemployed. In this case, as the ESRI put it "alienation shared is alienation amplified". Unemployed adults do not seem to form any kind of coherent group, particularly in the case of males, who tend to withdraw into isolation. Unemployed people are reluctant to see themselves as a group, tending to see their unemployment more as a personal problem. That is one reason why it is so difficult to organise the unemployed. Neither community nor parish flourishes in the large high-unemployment suburbs.

All in all, the evidence suggests that unemployment is highly destructive of living patterns among what has traditionally been called the lower working class, but can now be more accurately described as the lower non-working class. Unemployment is in danger of destroying the pattern of normal transitions that lead to adulthood, thus stunting the development and potentialities of hundreds of thousands of people.

*Hannan DF, and S O Riain, Pathways to Adulthood in Ireland. Dublin, ESRI, 1993.