






Understanding Social Exclusion

-  Since the mid-1990s the term and phenomenon of “social exclusion” has attracted much academic attention in the UK, and since 1997 has been an explicit focus of government policy. In a new book, CASE members examine the debate around the meaning of the term, and the extent and nature of problems it encompasses. Aspects covered include poverty dynamics, intergenerational and family links in disadvantage, the labour market, deprived neighbourhoods, and the impact of welfare policy.
-  Social exclusion is a contested term, with dispute over the agency responsible: globalisation, the nation state and its institutions, or excluded individuals themselves. Understanding it involves interactions between influences and outcomes at different levels - individual, family, community, national and global.
-  A feature of the concept is that it involves several dimensions of deprivation and participation. Looking at four of these - consumption, production, political activity and social engagement - UK data show that exclusion on one dimension is positively correlated with exclusion on the others. However, the correlation is not that strong: the dimensions are distinct rather than simply reflections of the same thing.
-  One advantage of the term is that it draws attention to dynamics, to changes over time and links across lives and between generations. Evidence shows that such links are strong, but not unbreakable. As with the differences between dimensions of exclusion, there is no sign of a substantial British underclass, permanently cut-off from mainstream society.
-  Evidence in the book suggests that policy can make a difference. A focus on “social exclusion” (rather than, say, poverty or deprivation) does not transform the scale or nature of the problems to be tackled. But it may change the emphasis of policy responses and can lead to a richer policy mix.

Further Information

This CASEbrief summarises findings from *Understanding Social Exclusion* edited by John Hills, Julian Le Grand and David Piachaud, published by Oxford University Press (paperback, ISBN 0-19-925194-0, £18.99; hardback, ISBN 0-19-925107-X, £50). The book is available from booksellers or from the Oxford University Press (24 hour credit card hotline: +44 (0) 1536 454534; email: book.orders@oup.co.uk; P&P for UK: £2.95 up to order value of £50.) Europe: £3.75 up to order of £50. Over £50 free.)

Social exclusion: Concepts and measurement

Social exclusion is a contested term. **Tania Burchardt, Julian Le Grand** and **David Piachaud** canvass a number of perspectives, from the Marxist interpretation of social exclusion as a necessary and inherent characteristic of capitalism, through the continental Republican view of social solidarity and social cohesion, to the American idea of an underclass. In particular, opinion is divided as to the agency responsible for social exclusion: globalisation, the nation state and its institutions, or the excluded individuals themselves. They present a framework for understanding social exclusion drawing on elements of many different perspectives, highlighting the interaction between influences and outcomes at different levels - individual, family, community, national and global.

Brian Barry grapples with the thorny question of voluntary exclusion - whether it is possible, whether it matters and what can be done about it. He defines “social isolation” as including both voluntary and involuntary exclusion. Apparently voluntary social exclusion, for example by members of a religious group withdrawing from broader society, should be treated with scepticism, since evaluation of whether it is truly voluntary depends on the quality of choices available to members of the group. Withdrawal as a response to hostility or discrimination is no more voluntary than leaving a job through constructive dismissal. In addition, genuinely voluntary exclusion may be fine for the individuals concerned (provided there is always a possibility of re-inclusion), but may nevertheless be problematic for the wider society.

Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud use data from the British Household Panel Study to operationalise one definition of social exclusion, based on four dimensions of participation: consumption, production, political activity and social engagement. They show the importance of taking multidimensionality seriously, since although exclusion on one dimension is positively and significantly correlated with exclusion on other dimensions, the correlation is not strong. The evidence also illustrates the difference between a snapshot and a longitudinal view of exclusion: after seven years have elapsed, one-third of the working age population has some experience of exclusion on the consumption dimension, and one-quarter has some experience of exclusion on the production dimension.

The dynamics of poverty

Poverty is an important component of social exclusion. **Simon Burgess** and **Carol Propper** review evidence on poverty dynamics - movements in and out of poverty - for the UK. What emerges is a picture of a society in which a large minority of individuals experience poverty at least once in a number of years. While for many this is a once-off event, many who escape do not move far from poverty. Within those who are poor, there is a group who experience repeated and persistent poverty. These UK patterns appear to be closer to those of the US than those of Canada or Germany. Now we know these facts, the research challenge is to take forward modelling approaches that allow a distinction to be made between causal factors and those that are correlates of entry and exit into poverty, so that policy can be focused to bring about long-term improvements reducing the chances of poverty.

Intergenerational and family links

John Hobcraft focuses on the inter-generational and intra-generational pathways into social exclusion, especially during young adulthood. He discusses how to assess the influences on adult social exclusion of parental endowments, of childhood circumstances, attributes, and behaviour, and of prior experiences during adulthood. He addresses conceptual issues in the definition of adult social exclusion and in understanding the interplays of nature and nurture. He presents a number of practical illustrations using data on a cohort of people born in 1958 and gives results on pervasive and specific childhood antecedents to adult social exclusion. To take this complex research agenda further will require judicious mix of empirical and theoretical approaches.

Children in Britain are amongst the most likely of European Union children to grow up in poverty. Youthful parenthood, solo motherhood and fragile unions are hallmarks of British family life that contribute to this finding. **Kathleen Kiernan's** analyses show that socio-economic vulnerability in childhood is powerfully associated with early parenthood and the partnership context within which a child is born, and that these demographic behaviours are also associated with disadvantage further along the life course. Socio-economic vulnerability is also implicated in parental separation, and parental separation can compound the disadvantage. Parental separation in turn is associated with youthful parenthood, solo motherhood and partnership dissolution. Disadvantage and demography matter, both as direct and indirect mutual influences on adult experiences.

The labour market and social exclusion

Abigail McKnight documents trends in low-pay and in-work poverty from the 1970s to the 1990s, and examines a selection of policies designed to reduce the causes or consequences of in-work poverty. The empirical evidence shows large rises in low-paid employment and a decrease in relative earnings of low-paid employees. While work tends to protect a household from poverty, employment in 1996 was less likely to protect a household from poverty than in 1968. Part of this difference is due to an increase in the share of households solely dependent on a low-paid employee and an increase in the likelihood of poverty in such households. Designing policies which reduce the causes of in-work poverty is challenging, but the greatest danger in ignoring it is that children both become very exposed to poverty and tend to carry the scars into their adult lives.

Social exclusion and neighbourhoods

Ruth Lupton and **Anne Power** focus on the neighbourhood dimension of social exclusion. They suggest that neighbourhood characteristics contribute to social exclusion via three mechanisms. Poor neighbourhoods have *negative intrinsic characteristics*: their location, housing stock and economic structure. As a result, they lose out in the process of *residential sorting*, drawing in the least advantaged members of society. Thirdly, long term concentrations of poverty cause neighbourhoods to *acquire further problems* - poor environments, services and facilities, high crime and low collective efficacy. Drawing on CASE's study of twelve disadvantaged areas, they illustrate these processes and draw out implications for policy.

Liz Richardson and **Katharine Mumford** use two pieces of in-depth research about low-income neighbourhoods to explore the meaning and function of 'community'. Communities are social systems as well as places where people consume goods and services. They term the combination of services and facilities with social organizations, "social infrastructure". Social infrastructure is one component of neighbourhood viability. When the infrastructure begins to unravel, facilities close, services enter crisis management, and anti-social behaviour escalates.

This is costly, in human and financial terms. Where the social infrastructure comes under great pressure, ways must be found to bolster it before it begins to unravel. The findings show that community action can be an important part of such strengthening. Small community groups cannot, by themselves, combat the effects of exclusionary forces like poverty, polarization and depopulation. But they can enable the formal infrastructure to work better by brokering between services and residents; directly provide additional services and facilities; and enhance social organisation through their existence, the networks they foster, and the confidence they build to strengthen shared norms and values.

Welfare policy and exclusion

This book examines the impact of welfare policy in countering and preventing exclusion in several ways. First, **David Piachaud** and **Holly Sutherland** examine policies towards child poverty. Evidence abounds that poverty in childhood has consequences for poverty in later life. Understanding the causes of child poverty and the impact of policy are therefore crucial in addressing social exclusion. Policies adopted in New Labour's first term are analysed to assess how far they go towards the goal of abolishing child poverty in a generation. Compared to what would have happened under unchanged policies, these policies reduce the number of children in poverty by over one million. This is partly through the promotion of paid work but primarily through redistribution to poorer families. But even if further policies to promote paid work were unrealistically successful, 1.7 million children would remain poor. The goal of equal opportunities for all children is more radical than has thus far been recognised.

Phil Agulnik, **Tania Burchardt** and **Martin Evans** examine the success (or otherwise) of the welfare state in combating social exclusion arising from the risks which individuals face during the lifecourse from three eventualities: unemployment, disability during working life and loss of income in retirement. Common themes emerge. Policymakers have a tendency to re-define the problem rather than tackling root causes, and this frequently results in simply shifting the problem elsewhere (for example from unemployment to disability, or from pensioner poverty to pensioner inequality). Preventative measures are often given precedence over responsive measures, but in reality the two cannot be easily disentangled (a theme returned to below).

Looking at education, **Howard Glennerster** and **Jo Sparkes's** dissection of the research evidence shows how closely educational achievement, early life experiences, and schooling impact on one another. CASE's research reinforces the strength of links between educational failure and social exclusion. Basic literacy and numeracy and 'soft' skills matter as well as examination performance.

School reforms in the 1990s boosted average and above-average performance, but did not work for the deprived. Recent evidence is more encouraging, but gaps between deprived and other secondary schools are yawning. School funding systems do not allocate enough additional resources to cope with disruptive children or to boost parental involvement.

Does the policy response change?

Finally, **John Hills** considers whether this kind of evidence and a focus on "social exclusion" changes policy. He suggests it can change the emphasis and lead to a richer mix, rather than transforming policy:

- The concept emphasises wider aspects of deprivation, not just cash.
- Taking account of income dynamics allows differentiation between groups by trajectory.
- Contrasting "passive" and "active" welfare systems is too simplistic. Distinguishing between policies affecting the chances of good and adverse events and their effects gives four types of policy: prevention, promotion, protection, and propulsion.
- Interventions protective for one generation can be preventive for the next.
- A focus on inclusion can change how we look at policy instruments.

About the research

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