BULLETIN

Breaking Down Spatial Barriers

In recent years there has been an upsurge of interest in the 'role of geography' in the labour market behaviour of, and access to employment by, people resident in deprived areas. Indeed, a Social Exclusion Unit report on *Jobs and Enterprise in Deprived Areas* published in September 2004 examines the existence and persistence of spatial 'concentrations of worklessness' despite overall improvements in the economy and labour market. It assesses why they occur and seeks to identify what more can be done to tackle them. An earlier Social Exclusion Unit report focusing on transport and social exclusion[1] highlighted transport problems and inaccessibility as reinforcing social exclusion for disadvantaged people in deprived areas, preventing access to work and training. Often barriers to work for the most disadvantaged are multiple and varied. Some of these barriers are 'objective', while others are 'subjective' or 'perceptual'. This Bulletin summarises some of the key findings from research undertaken at the Warwick Institute for Employment Research in partnership with researchers from the School of Geography at the Queen's University, Belfast, on the role played by area perceptions in shaping access to employment,[2] and more particularly on a review of policy initiatives concerned with 'widening mental maps' and so 'breaking down spatial barriers' to employment.[3]

The role of geography in shaping access to employment

In debates about access to work the role of area perceptions in shaping the labour market behaviour of individuals (and employers) has been relatively neglected. This is despite the fact that labour markets are institutional and social constructs,[4] shaped by lived traditions within localities. Decisions are based on information that has come through a perceptual filter, and because of this labour market experiences of individuals are highly diverse. The spatiality of labour markets can and does vary by other background characteristics – such as educational level, ethnicity, and access to private and public transport.

This move towards 'social space' (i.e. understandings of the geography of labour markets as shaped by perceptions and social contexts) – is given greater force by research in North America which has suggested that individuals' choices made regarding whether and where to work are based on 'subjective' values and aspirations, which are in turn constrained by 'objective' opportunities available to individuals at the local level. It has been hypothesised that shaped by social experiences (e.g. geographical knowledge of certain areas gathered in the course of other everyday activities such as shopping and leisure activities), subjective factors influence decision-making about jobs over and above objective physical constraints.[5] So 'imperfect knowledge' about the geography of labour market opportunities can act as a barrier to employment for disadvantaged people.[6]

Likewise, in the UK, a study of unemployed school-leavers in Birmingham during the early 1980s,[7] found that job search tended to be limited to familiar areas and that there were accessible areas of the city where jobs were not sought: the mental maps of young people were such that *perceived* job opportunities were a subset of *actual* job opportunities.

Area perceptions and limited 'life-worlds': the example of disadvantaged young people in Belfast

A research project undertaken in Belfast[8] sought to gain an understanding of what less-affluent young people in Belfast know about the geography of labour market opportunities in the city (and beyond) and the locations where they are prepared to work. In some respects Belfast provides an extreme example in the UK context because of the significance of the religious 'chill factor'. However, the aspects of spatial decision making explored – including area perceptions, neighbourhood identity, gender and the influence of social class, family and friends – have a wider resonance beyond the Northern Ireland context. Key features of young people's mental maps were assessed and the geographical extent of job search was investigated. The research also explored the subjective behavioural factors that influenced young people's choices about *which* jobs should be sought *where*.

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Overall, the young people surveyed had a reasonable picture of the locations of the major concentrations of job opportunities in Belfast – especially the city centre, although there was scope for improving such knowledge. Although the mental maps of people in different areas of the city varied, the majority of maps were highly localised. There was an obvious tendency for people to focus on their home area.

From mental maps drawn by young people, complemented by focus group discussions, it is clear that area perceptions and social constraints mean that not all of the available training and employment opportunities that are open to young people are considered. Rather, there is a tendency amongst many to restrict their options and chances of employment by discounting training and employment openings in areas that are accessible, yet unfamiliar. For those young people without their own transport, a reliance on lifts means that there is a structural tendency to follow existing concentrations of where family, friends and neighbours work. This may serve to reinforce tendencies towards segregation, holding all other factors constant, so leading to 'concentrated disadvantage' in some instances. Amongst young people with no or few qualifications limited travel horizons, lack of confidence and low aspirations tend to be mutually reinforcing.

On the other hand, those with some experience of employment in different areas, or with a somewhat wider knowledge of the geography of Belfast – often through participation in non-work activities such as sport, seemed willing to consider a wider range of opportunities and to travel further afield, so gaining greater experience of mixing with a wider range of people. Their larger 'life-world' impacted on their labour market aspirations and behaviour. This suggests that there is a role for policies to enhance the spatial mobility of disadvantaged people in the labour market.

'Jobs to workers' and 'workers to jobs'

The UK Government believes that for those who are able to work, employment is the best route out of poverty. It is concerned to achieve full employment in every region by tackling areas of disadvantage and concentrations of worklessness[9] – with an emphasis on supply-side solutions aimed at promoting employability.

In demand-led explanations of concentrations of worklessness it is argued that shifts in the geographical and sectoral composition of employment mean that some locations have a shortage of local accessible jobs. Hence, one way of reintegrating jobless people into the local labour market in such locations is to bring 'jobs to workers'. Moving jobs to workers has a number of possible advantages for deprived people and workers:

1) Since many workers, particularly those in low paid and unskilled jobs, travel relatively short distances to work compared to workers in more highly skilled occupations, there are good grounds for locating jobs near areas of high unemployment.

2) Local jobs might confer a number of benefits because reduced travelling time makes it easier to balance the demands of home and work, as well as reducing the ecological costs of commuting.

There are potential problems with bringing jobs to workers, and these limitations lead towards arguments for encouraging workers to be mobile in search of employment:

1) A policy of bringing jobs to workers can lead to an unhealthy reliance on local jobs for people in deprived areas: if local jobs are lost then the communities formerly reliant upon them will be left 'stranded', and many individuals in these communities may lack experience or confidence to look for work beyond the immediate locality. Hence, it may be argued that the best way to ensure long-term employment is to focus on the supply-side: enhancing skill levels, and to promote geographical mobility; to increase the range of job opportunities that are open to residents of deprived communities.

2) The way that local labour markets operate set limits to the practicality of bringing jobs to deprived areas (and people): the 'leakage' of jobs to non-local residents suggests that bringing jobs to workers often is not a viable solution.

3) There are significant external constraints on the possibilities for targeting jobs to specific areas.

The interplay of these factors indicates that worker mobility, to maximise the range of opportunities that are open, seems to be an appropriate response.

Policies to enhance worker mobility: introduction

A variety of policy initiatives have been employed to enhance the mobility of workers and increase the accessibility of jobs. A distinction can be made between:

- transport projects,
- fare reduction schemes,
- use of discretionary funds and enhanced flexibility,
- personal development programmes,

although in practice there are important overlaps between the categories.

Transport projects

A proportion of journeys to work cannot be made using the existing public transport network because there is no service at the desired times, journey times are too long, more than one interchange is required or the place of work is poorly situated on the network. The principal characteristic of work journeys that do not fit conventional public transport is their diffuse pattern, often with relatively small numbers travelling at different times with many different nodes.

In some cases, 'demand responsive transport' may be a solution. Typically such initiatives aim to 'fill the gaps' where suitable public transport services do not exist. *Job Link Buses* have been introduced in some local areas to address specific

employment-related accessibility problems – linking deprived areas with areas of employment.[10] There are questions about the sustainability of job link bus services in the medium- and long-term. They receive public funding for finite time periods only, and measured purely in the 'transport' domain they may be perceived as costly and are unlikely to be sustainable without ongoing revenue support.

In some instances demand responsive services may not be a solution to employment-related accessibility problems, and a bespoke solution is needed for each individual. *Wheels to Work* initiatives provide the means for individuals to make work journeys that are not possible by conventional public transport or flexible demand responsive services. Possible individual solutions might include scooter hire, assistance with motoring costs, (partial) funding of driving lessons, cycle pools, support for organising car sharing or taxi vouchers, etc. Such schemes provide assistance for a finite period only, and then an individual has to make his/her own travel arrangements.

Workwise schemes to help get unemployed people into work or training and to promote sustainable travel habits embrace a diversity of transport-related initiatives – including travel information and fare reductions. Ready availability of easily understandable 'travel information' and 'travel advocacy' are central elements of Workwise initiatives, since limited travel horizons may be linked to a lack of awareness of both travel opportunities and where to find information about mainstream and less conventional public passenger transport services, and to a lack of confidence in making unfamiliar journeys to new destinations.

Information has an important role in countering the 'perception gap' that stops some individuals from widening their mental maps. In order to help address this information deficit, a £3 million Travel Information and Journey Planning Fund has been introduced for improving travel information and journey planning in Jobcentre Plus offices. A commitment has been made to encourage Jobcentre Plus staff to gain a greater knowledge of how local transport works and how accessible different employment sites are in order to help their clients overcome transport barriers and widen their job search horizons.

Travel advocacy goes a step further: it is about building confidence in using transport by providing enhanced assistance to jobseekers through an individualised service at 'point of use', so encouraging people to make 'informed choices' 'in the round' and acquire the confidence to 'move out of their comfort zone'.

The Department for Transport is promoting *accesssibility planning* – aiming to make services more accessible, especially to socially excluded people. It involves:

1) focusing on users that are socially excluded and on functions that are required by the socially excluded (including employment and education)

2) optimising transport systems to ensure good access to public facilities

3) designing and locating public facilities so that they are accessible to all users.

In Summer 2004 the Department issued Guidance on Local Accessibility Planning for local authorities in England.[11]

Fare reduction initiatives

The affordability of travel serves to limit an individual's area of search for work – both spatially (in terms of geographical reach) and temporally (in terms of frequency of search journeys). Fare reduction initiatives can address some of these affordability barriers.

The cost of attending interviews may be offset by schemes offering free or subsidised travel. The *Travel to Interview Scheme* was set up to help unemployed people by paying the cost of travelling to a job interview beyond usual travelling distance of their home. Over time, there has been an extension of eligibility for the scheme to cover claimants of more benefits, and also to cover a wider range of journeys.

Travel passes/reduced fares can go some way to tackling affordability barriers for those participating in government schemes, who are in training or who are starting a new job. Various schemes are in operation in different parts of Britain involving partnerships of transport operators and Jobcentre Plus.

Enhanced discretion and flexibility

In addition to fare reduction initiatives, Jobcentre Plus has increasingly encouraged the use of flexible approaches to help tackle the many and diverse barriers that jobseekers face in travelling to interviews and/or accessing employment opportunities. A key feature of increased flexibility is the use of discretionary funds to help enhance spatial mobility. The *Adviser Discretion Fund* aims to give certain jobseekers financial assistance to purchase appropriate goods or services which will help to overcome barriers to work – including travel-related items. The focus is on provision of bespoke solutions for the individual.

The existence of objective variations in the local configurations of homes, jobs and transport infrastructure, along with a realisation that local culture is important in shaping perceptions and job search behaviour, has led to a recognition of a need for a more nuanced approach to policy implementation, and in some instances, policy formulation, involving discretion in different local areas. The result is *enhanced policy flexibility*. From April 2004 Jobcentre Plus District Managers have increased opportunities and new flexibilities to design and define initiatives to more effectively meet the changing and specific needs of their local areas.

In location-specific initiatives focusing on deprived areas – such as Employment Zones, Action Teams for Jobs and now Working Neighbourhoods pilots – the emphasis is on innovative and flexible solutions to local meet local needs and circumstances.

Personal development programmes

A recognition that barriers to work are often complex and inter-linked lies at the heart of personal development programmes. These programmes are designed to deal with barriers 'in the round', in recognition of the fact that once one barrier is dealt with, another barrier that was previously hidden might emerge.

Personal development programmes are not specifically or explicitly aimed at 'breaking down spatial barriers', but instead focus on confidence-building and raising self-esteem and awareness. They involve 'challenging assumptions/ perceptions' and 'self-imposed barriers' in a holistic fashion by showing clients that they are able to learn new skills. The 'travel' aspect is embedded in a 'holistic' programme which aims to enhance confidence, self-esteem and 'broaden horizons' more generally.

Various *travel training initiatives* have sought to address in a more explicit fashion the lack of confidence and knowledge that are amongst the barriers to expanding the travel and job search horizons of job seekers. These are often locally-based schemes, run on a partnership basis and involving local transport operators, providing 'rewards' and 'incentives' in a way that encourages use of travel passes for all sorts of journey purposes (e.g. for leisure, as well as for work/training), and so enhance their knowledge and confidence of travelling around the local area and beyond.

Conclusion

There are limits to the extent to which moving 'jobs to workers' can ameliorate spatial concentrations of worklessness. The porosity of local labour markets emphasises that co-location of workplaces and residences does not necessarily lead to local people filling jobs available nearby. A policy of provision of suitable training opportunities and jobs close to where socially disadvantaged people live does not encourage residents to extend their travel horizons or raise their aspirations. Hence, while recognising the barriers faced by some people, there is a role for policies to enhance the geographical mobility of disadvantaged people in the labour market.

In particular, there is a role for transport-related initiatives in helping to overcome spatial barriers to employment – either by upgrading public transport or supporting car ownership. Partnership working is likely to be a key to successful initiatives, since accessibility and mobility cross different policy domains. Moreover, the benefits of such initiatives are likely to be reaped across a number of different domains.

Travel training initiatives and personal development programmes have a potential role in helping to overcome perceptual barriers and so widening mental maps. The evidence suggests that it is important to work with children and young people, to promote their spatial knowledge and promote their confidence about travelling outside their immediate local area.

For the most disadvantaged, personalised support targeted at addressing individual needs and involving incremental 'small steps' is likely to be necessary. While outreach services might be used by agencies in the first instance to generate trust and facilitate 'engagement', it is important to 'broaden horizons' from such a base – so as to expand 'life-worlds', and so 'extend the comfort zone'.

Notes and References

[1] Social Exclusion Unit (2003) *Making the Connections: Final Report on Transport and Social Exclusion*. London: Social Exclusion Unit.

[2] Research on area perceptions of young people in Belfast was undertaken with Ian Shuttleworth and Stuart Lavery. For a summary of the research project see Green A.E., Shuttleworth I. and Lavery S. (2003) 'Area perceptions and young people in Belfast: implications for job search and exclusion', *Labour Market Bulletin* 17, 129-36 – available at http://www.delni.gov.uk/docs/pdf/Labour%20Bull%2017.pdf The full project report is Shuttleworth I., Green A. and Lavery S. (2003) *Belfast Area Perceptions Study: Mobility, Employment and Exclusion*, Report published by the Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland. (ISBN 0 9545592 1 5). An article based on the research appears in a Special Issue of *Urban Studies* on 'Employability and Local Labour Markets' – see Green A.E., Shuttleworth I. and Lavery S. (2005) 'Young people, job search and labour markets: the example of Belfast', *Urban Studies* 42 (2).

[3] Green A. and Shuttleworth I. (2004) *Widening Mental Maps, Breaking Down Spatial Barriers: A Review of Policy Initiatives*. Report to the Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland.

[4] Peck J. (1996) *Workplace*. London: Guildford Press.

[5] Galster G.C. and Killen S.P. (1995) 'The geography of metropolitan opportunity: a reconnaissance and conceptual framework', *Housing Policy Debate* 6 (1), 7-43.

[6] Ihlanfeldt K.R. (1997) 'Information on the spatial distribution of job opportunities within metropolitan areas', *Journal of Urban Economics* 41, 218-42.

[7] Quinn D.J. (1986) 'Accessibility and job search: a study of unemployed school leavers', *Regional Studies* 20, 163-73.

[8] See note 2.

[9] HM Treasury / Department for Work and Pensions (2003) *Full employment in every region*. London: HM Treasury/DWP.

[10] There are examples operating in various parts of Britain – for example, in the Mersey-Dee Alliance area linking deprived areas of Merseyside to job opportunities in Deeside, and Buster Werkenbak operating in certain deprived areas of Birmingham and Solihull.

[11] For details see: http://www.dft.gov.uk/stellent/groups/dft_control/documents/contentservertemplate/dft_index.hcst?n=8588&l=2

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