

Can't work or won't work? – Youth unemployment in Great Britain

- 1 “A lost generation”; “a wasted generation”; “a generation on the scrap heap” – those are some of the reactions to the news that youth unemployment has risen to nearly one million. And it is not hard to understand why. Unemployment at any time of life can be a disaster, but it can have particularly pernicious effects on the young, whose habits of work have not yet been formed: if a youngster spends a long time out of work and on benefits, he or she may never develop the discipline and determination necessary to seek and hold down a job.
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- 1 “Youth” is defined as the 16-to-24 age group. The youth unemployment rate is now running at just over 20 per cent, which is the highest level since records began in 1992. What’s the explanation for it? The economy is still reeling from the effects of the recession of 2009: confidence is low, as is investment, and the jobs are simply not being created. Millions of youngsters leave school or university every year – and that’s why, this year, there are fewer jobs than ever available to them.
- 2 At least, that’s the conventional story. But there is evidence that it may not be the whole truth. Christine Snell runs Windmill Hill Fruit Growers, a soft fruit farm in Herefordshire. She has more than 300 people working on her farm in the summer, and she needs to employ at least 30 even during the winter months. The work is ideal for youngsters because experience is not necessary: all you need is a degree of physical fitness and the ability to turn up on time. How many of her workers are English? Just one. She recruits almost the whole of her workforce abroad, mostly from Bulgaria and Romania. “I desperately want to recruit locally,” she explains. “Every few months, I place ads in an attempt to attract local workers. The response to my most recent ad was typical. I got 17 replies. When I explained what was required – five days a week, eight hours a day, with wages of £6.50 an hour – only two of them were willing to work for me. The others dropped out either because they didn’t like the look of the work, or because I explained that I needed their National Insurance number in order to pay them. They wanted cash – they said if they weren’t paid in cash, they would lose their benefits, which they were eager to keep.” [...]
- 3 So is the alarm over youth unemployment in Britain overdone? No, and for one simple reason: younger workers are the country’s future. If a large portion of them are unemployed for a prolonged period, that will have long-term effects on the kind of labour force we have.
- 4 “If you’re young and you are out of work for months on end,” Dr Wadsworth explains, [an economist at the London School of Economics who specialises in the study of youth unemployment] “there is a great deal of evidence that it becomes more and more difficult for you to get a job, ever, or to hold on to one if you do get one.”
- 5 It is at this point that it starts to look plausible to claim that the benefits system may indeed be part of the problem. “It encourages people not to go out to work – they don’t have to, because they can live adequately on benefits. As a consequence, young people stay on benefits. They never learn the habits of work,” Dr David Green, director of the think tank Civitas, asserts. “That’s terrible for them, and terrible for us as a society.”
- 6 Dr Green’s claim fits in very obviously with Mrs Snell’s experience. “In a way,” she explains, “you can’t blame so many young people for being so reluctant to work. They are used to getting something for nothing. The ones I see are often very frank with me: they tell me they won’t work for me because it’s too hard for them to be here at 8 o’clock in the morning when they’re used to lying in bed for as long as they feel like – and still getting money.”
- 7 Dr Green thinks that the welfare system should be based on one very simple principle: if you won’t take a job that’s on offer, you won’t get any benefits. “That principle of ‘conditionality’ would have an enormous effect on the attitude to work in this country. It is one of the tragedies of public policy that no government has dared to introduce it.” [...]
- 8 As an example of what can happen if the government makes a credible threat to withdraw welfare cheques from those who will not take an available job, Dr Green cites the American state of Wisconsin. “Rates of benefit dependency fell by two thirds,” he notes. “Most of the people who had been receiving benefits got jobs in the private sector.” None of them became rich, but nearly all of them were better off than they had been when they were dependent on welfare. “And they had got the habit of working, and realised the self-respect and dignity that comes with being self-sufficient, at least to some degree.” [...]

Annotations

line 7: **pernicious** – damaging

line 17: **to reel** – *here*: opposite of develop steadily

line 95: **credible** – believable

line 107: **dignity** – *Würde*

line 107: **self-sufficient** – opposite of dependent on welfare benefits

Tasks

1 Content/Comprehension

Outline the causes and effects of youth unemployment in the UK as mentioned explicitly and implicitly in the article.

2 Form/Analysis

Analyse the author's train of thought – what is the answer to the question in the headline 'Can't work or won't work?' You may refer to the paragraphs in the margins (1–8).

3 Comment/Text production

Choose one of the following tasks:

- a) Write a letter to the editor criticising one or more points the author makes.
- b) Germany has a much lower youth unemployment rate than the UK (5% in Germany as opposed to 20% in the UK). Write a broadsheet newspaper article 'How Germany keeps youth unemployment low' in which you explain why you think youth unemployment is currently relatively low in Germany.
- c) This is an article from a quality paper. Write a comment on youth unemployment for a tabloid newspaper.

Erwartungshorizont

Textinformation

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1 Content/Comprehension

Outline the causes and effects of youth unemployment in the UK as mentioned explicitly and implicitly in the article.

Causes:

- ♦ the aftermath of the recession of 2009 and the slow recovery of the economy
- ♦ the low level of investment has resulted in few new jobs
- ♦ low-paid jobs are unattractive if people lose their benefits
- ♦ problem: benefits are paid unconditionally even if jobs are available

Effects:

- ♦ benefits create a culture of entitlement
- ♦ short-term negative effects: the welfare system rewards laziness
- ♦ long-term negative effects:
 - ↖ prolonged unemployment leads to a lack of determination and self-discipline to pursue regular jobs
 - ↖ long-term dependency eventually leads to a loss of dignity, which would have a negative impact on society because young people are the country's future
 - ↖ the situation in Wisconsin illustrates another negative effect – the welfare system keeps people dependent which results in high costs

2 Form/Analysis

Analyse the author's train of thought – what is the answer to the question in the headline 'Can't work or won't work?' You may refer to the paragraphs in the margins (1–8).

The article:

- ♦ starts out by quoting widespread opinion on youth unemployment (1).
- ♦ analyses economic reasons (2), which seem to suggest that young people can't work (because of low demand for labour and few new jobs).
- ♦ looks at one individual employer and her difficulties hiring young British people (3) in order to show that young people often won't work (because they prefer being on benefits).
- ♦ quotes an academic researcher on the question of why society needs to address the problem (4).
- ♦ quotes another expert who blames the welfare state (5) which rewards young people who won't work.
- ♦ quotes the employer who supports the experts' view that the welfare system is to blame due her personal experience with people on welfare (6).
- ♦ suggests a way to encourage young people to look for jobs (7).
- ♦ provides evidence of how the system works in the US to convince readers that the measure might be effective (8).

→ The answer to the question seems to be that young people often don't work because the system allows them to remain dependent. But the welfare systems in other countries show that young people will work if working is more attractive than staying on the dole.

3 Comment/Text production

a) Write a letter to the editor criticising one or more points the author makes.

Dear Sir

I have read your article 'Can't work or won't work?', and I was quite irritated by it. You claim that the problem with unemployed young people is their attitude towards work; namely, you say they don't want to work. But what about the lack of job opportunities in our economy? In order to prove your point, you quote one employer, a farmer, who talks about her experience with people on welfare. She says she wants to hire English workers, but she can't find any. She seems to believe that the jobs she offers are attractive. But what the article does not say is that these jobs are actually quite unattractive: They are badly paid seasonal jobs, and they offer no opportunities for career progression.

I believe objective journalism needs to conduct more research and present more than just one example. I don't see how you can draw general conclusions about the young generation from a single case. Lots of young people I know are very willing to start and to hold jobs even if they are entitled to welfare. I wish you had also presented some of those young people in order to provide a more balanced picture.

Yours sincerely

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b) Germany has a much lower youth unemployment rate than the UK (5% in Germany as opposed to 20% in the UK). Write a broadsheet newspaper article 'How Germany keeps youth unemployment low' in which you explain why you think youth unemployment is currently relatively low in Germany.

How Germany keeps youth unemployment low

In Germany youth unemployment is at 5%; that is lower than in most European countries. Why does Germany have such a low youth unemployment rate? Many factors play a role, but two of the most important aspects seem to be the strong economy on the one hand and the qualifications required for jobs on the other.

When young German pupils leave school, they don't usually start working right away. Rather, they move on to vocational training in order to qualify for the labour market. This means that they are apprentices for three years and have on the job training with experienced trainers or senior workers. During that period they also attend vocational school to continue their general education. The pay is modest in the first year but higher in the second and third years. What is more important, however, is that at the end of the three-year course the young people are qualified for jobs, and employers are eager to hire them. There is a wide range of apprenticeships to choose from including traditional ones like hairdressing and butchery as well as modern ones like auto repair or computer science. And most young people will eventually find a suitable job in their trade.

c) This is an article from a quality paper. Write a comment on youth unemployment for a tabloid newspaper.

Too lazy to work?

When John Smith finished school, he didn't know what to do. "I'm not really keen on working 9 to 5 Monday through Friday – that's just a bit too much. I want a flexible job that pays really good money." But surprise, surprise! How many well-paying, flexible jobs are there for somebody with no qualifications and no previous job experience? When he went to the job centre, he was offered a job at a farm picking strawberries all day. "I didn't really fancy picking fruit for eight hours a day – that's really tough work! And actually the pay wasn't all that great, either. I mean, why bother working for such lousy pay when you can get welfare instead?"

That was half a year ago. He's tried a few jobs since, but he says, "Getting up early in the morning to go to work takes a bit of effort after so many months out of school. It's just so much easier to stay on welfare," he admits. There are thousands of Johns in our country, thousands of young people who are quite capable of working for their living. But are simply too lazy to work.