This report provides a comprehensive overview of extended youth transitions in the West of Scotland highlighting effective processes of social inclusion and patterns of vulnerability. Drawing on a longitudinal survey of young adults currently aged 28/29, the report provides an assessment of the extent to which different groups of young people became active in shaping their post-school experiences and of the factors which limited or constrained their choices. The relationship between personal characteristics and labour market experiences are examined and an assessment is made of the ways in which young people adapt to the insecurities and uncertainties of modern labour markets.

Main Findings

- Few young people left school with clear ideas about how they could manage their transition to work effectively.
- Young people who lacked qualifications and skills often had difficulties in establishing themselves in the labour market and became vulnerable to repeated and extended periods of unemployment.
- Other factors linked to vulnerability included low social class, a paternal history of unemployment and residence in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.
- Family knowledge and connections were central to the effective management of transitions.
- Aside from the larger companies, firms tended not to provide young people with core transferable skills and most provided minimal training.
- Most of those who encountered difficulties did so within the first three years of entering the labour market, but the majority eventually secured jobs without external intervention.
- Around six per cent of the cohort experienced ‘chaotic’ transitions with their early careers dominated by unemployment.
- Most of those who encountered long-term and repeated unemployment did so after having spent time in work, sometimes for lengthy periods.
- Young people tended to overcome difficult or unexpected situations through determination and persistence combined with strong family support.
Processes of integration

New patterns of participation in education and training have resulted in a greater protraction of youth transitions with few having been able to make the early and direct transitions from school to employment that were relatively common up until the 1980s. On leaving school, few young people had clear ideas about how they could manage their transition to work in an effective manner and an initial period of ‘floundering’ was commonplace. While young people frequently went to great lengths to secure work, their efforts were often unfocused; opportunism rather than strategic planning best described the ways in which they managed transitions to work. However, once they gained a toe-hold in the labour market, they developed in skills and confidence. Moves to other jobs became easier and they were better equipped to cope with unexpected disruptions.

A distinction was made between linear and non-linear transitions and this facilitated a differentiation between those routes that were clearly inclusive (linear) and those that were more risky (non-linear). The more risky routes were followed by many of those who were less advantaged; those from the lower social classes and especially those whose fathers had encountered long-term unemployment, those with poorer qualifications and those from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Although around half of the cohort experienced the breaks and disruptions characteristic of non-linear routes, most young people eventually achieved integration and subsequent careers were largely unproblematic.

Training was central to future job security, yet few firms provided quality training and a minimalist approach tended to prevail. Many vulnerable young people benefited from initiatives such as youth training, yet many were trained in occupations they had no real desire to undertake. The effectiveness of initiatives largely depends on ensuring that young people ‘buy-into’ a future occupational identity and are equipped with recognised vocational qualifications and transferable skills.

Processes of marginalisation

One in two young people experienced unemployment by the age of 23 with the experience crosscutting the social spectrum: graduates as well as young people with no qualifications frequently spent time out of work. However, for most young people, unemployment was short-lived and most moved on into employment without significant scars. For others, unemployment was long term and/or recurrent. Most of those encountering difficulties tended to do so within the first three years of entering the labour market, but the majority were re-integrated without external intervention.

Young people who lacked qualifications and skills sometimes had difficulties in establishing themselves in the labour market and became vulnerable to repeated and extended periods of unemployment. A small core of young people who experienced chaotic transitions were identified. This group only comprised around six per cent of the cohort, yet their early labour market careers were heavily dominated by unemployment.

Unemployed young people rarely lacked the determination to find work or were waiting to fulfil unrealistic aspirations. Most went to great lengths to find work and tended to downgrade their aspirations relatively quickly, even when they had invested heavily in training and skill development. Indeed, most of those who encountered long-term and repeated unemployment were not ‘unemployable’ and had previously held jobs, sometimes for lengthy periods.

With virtually all of the young people interviewed being strongly committed to securing and maintaining fulfilling employment, the need to underpin the benefit system so explicitly with the threat of sanctions would appear to be unnecessary. The evidence suggests that withdrawal of benefits is itself associated with exclusion. In the absence of strong family support, the withdrawal of benefits provides a strong incentive for young people to engage in crime or the informal economy.

Protecting against marginalisation

A new model of transitions was developed to facilitate a more advanced understanding of processes of social inclusion. The approach recognises the multi-dimensional nature of vulnerability and the ways in which young people draw on different resources to secure employment. To make effective transitions young people have to draw on a variety of resources including educational qualifications, vocational training and skills as well as knowledge and family resources. Aspects of personal agency such as initiative and motivation are also crucial and it is important to acknowledge processes of rationalisation as a factor that provides a mediating link between resources and outcomes. In many cases, young people are able to compensate for deficits in specific resources (education, for example) by drawing on other compensatory resources (such as family support). However, when a resource deficit is combined with weak personal agency there is likely to be a dramatic increase in the chances of ‘negative’ outcomes. Importantly, each resource represents a potential safety net and deficits in one area can potentially be countered by surpluses in another.

When young people were forced to cope with difficult or
unexpected situations, hurdles were overcome through determination and persistence combined with strong family support. In these circumstances those who were unable to rely on family support were most vulnerable to social exclusion.

Initiatives such as the New Deal could be targeted more effectively. Only around one in five of those young people who had been unemployed for over six months were subject to long-term vulnerability. It is important that policies that aim to smooth transitions address aspects of agency (such as motivation) as well as resource deficits (education, training, knowledge, support etc.). If a set of policies fail to adopt a holistic approach, then their overall effectiveness will be weakened. Interventions must incorporate personal support, but need to be underpinned by resources to fund skill development or mobility.

Based on patterns of vulnerability identified by the research, there is a need for specific interventions directed towards:

- Young people who encounter a substantial period of unemployment (six months) beginning in the first year of labour market entry;
- Young people who experience cumulative unemployment of over a year at any stage;
- Young people with complex career histories (even when they have managed to avoid long-term unemployment).

### About the study of youth transitions

This research was undertaken by Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel (University of Glasgow), Andy Biggart (University of Ulster) and Helen Sweeting and Patrick West (MRC Social and Public Health Sciences Unit). The main aims of the research were:

- To describe the range and complexity of routes followed by a representative sample of young people between the ages of 15 and 27/28, highlighting variation by social class, family structure, gender, educational attainments and attitudes.
- To investigate the relationship between vulnerability and marginalisation in the context of extended and overlapping transitions and to assess the extent to which transitional experiences themselves promote vulnerability and marginalisation.
- To assess the extent to which different groups of young people have become active negotiators of their own transitions and to highlight the constraints on active life management stemming from personal characteristics and opportunity structures.
- To develop more comprehensive conceptual models of the contemporary transitional experiences of young people in Scotland which will facilitate more effective targeting of resources and the development of early intervention strategies for vulnerable youth.

The report is based on a longitudinal study of young people between the ages of 15 and 28/29 located in the Greater Glasgow conurbation (Twenty-07 study) which has been funded by the Medical Research Council. A representative sample of 1009 15 year-olds and their parents in this area participated in the first round of interviews in 1987. The sample was subsequently followed-up at age 16, 18, 21 and 23 (postal surveys at ages 16 and 21 and face-to-face interviews at ages 18 and 23) with 28/29 year-olds being interviewed from 2000.

This report is largely based on survey data collected up until the age of 23, at which stage 68 per cent of the original sample responded (n=660). However, a preliminary analysis of data from the latest sweep (28/29 year-olds) has also been included.

The research team also conducted a series of 60 qualitative interviews among 28/29 year-olds in order to obtain their biographical accounts, including information on the ways in which individual strategies or behaviours increase or diminish the risk of marginalisation.