

The Informal & Illegal Economy: Outside the mainstream or just another job?



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Overview:

1. The new pressures and demands facing young people;
2. How some young people responding to these changes
3. how young people are constructing, and talking about, their engagement in the informal and illegal economy;
4. the impact that engaging in the informal and illegal economy has on young people's health and wellbeing;
5. possibilities for future research



The new pressures and
demands facing young
people

The new demands

Research continues to reveal...

- Rapidly changing environment - technology, education, work, globalisation etc.
- Previous 'indicators' of 'success' are now *(becoming)* redundant (mixed life patterns as opposed to linear trajectories);
- Decline of opportunity for the uncredentialed;
- A growing mismatch between actual credentials and employment outcomes;

The new demands

- Overlap between study, work & leisure
- Increase in part-time, flexible, insecure employment outcomes for graduates
- 'Life-long' learning
- HECS Generation – Debt Generation
- Changing family structures
- More sedentary life than ever before
- Environmental degradation

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- Societies that enable all their citizens to play a full and useful role in the social, *economic* and cultural life of their society will be healthier than those where people face insecurity, exclusion and deprivation (Wilkinson & Marmot, 1998).



How are some young
people responding to
these changes

What does research tell us?

‘In contemporary society, prostitution, for some women, offers a good enough standard of income for shorter working hours and some degree of autonomy and independence for those working for themselves’ (O’Neill, 1997:3)

What does research tell us?

20% of the 321 Victorian sex workers surveyed, or one in five, were currently studying: 10% were studying at University, 4% at TAFE, 6% in other areas of less formal study such as massage and personal development and 0.7% were at high school.

(Pyett, Haste, & Snow, Profile of Workers in the Sex Industry, La Trobe University, Melbourne, 1995:9)

What does research tell us?

**‘...[students] earn all of their income from or supplement low earnings or welfare benefits with prostitution’
(Weiner, 1996)**

**‘...students were working to pay their way through college or university’
(Perkins, 1991)**

What does research tell us?

- ‘..... two thirds (58.3%) of the 168 young people surveyed under the age of eighteen, had worked in the informal waged economy’ (White, Anuir, Harris & McDonnell, 1997).

What does research tell us?

- The majority of cash-in-hand work occurred in the service (retail) industry and illegal activities included drug dealing, shoplifting, organised stealing rings and prostitution (White, Anuir, Harris & McDonnell, 1997:57).

What does research tell us?

- Young people gain income support through means such as emergency relief systems, agency funds, trading in fashion items, basketball card dealing, begging and living together to pool funds (White, 1995:9; Long & Hayden, 2001; Turale, 2001; Wilson, 2000).

What does research tell us?

- ‘... in the context of post-industrial economies wherein traditional work identities and cultures are denied to many adults...drug use and trading have become work-like activities, likely to develop and have appeal for young people particularly where actual work, as employment, is scarce and low paying’ (MacDonald, 1998:171).

What does research tell us?

- 'To those who have already sensed that their own chances of entering the mainstream economy are effectively nil ... the reasons not to deal drugs must seem weak indeed.... In an age that celebrates entrepreneurial ardour above all, when the idea of the dignity of labour has come to seem quaint at best, washing dishes or flipping burgers for a risible wage becomes an act of either blind faith or sheer desperation' (Finnegan, 1998:45).

What does research tell us?

- The impact of welfare reform in the United States meant that 10% of the 400 women interviewed engaged in many covert survival strategies to make their ends meet. These included working under a false identification, relying on bartering, and working for cash in hand work such as baby-sitting. While these survival strategies were flexible, they were also often highly time consuming, unstable, and women were left open to exploitation and harassment (Edin, 2003)



The Research: How young people are constructing, and talking about, their engagement in the informal and illegal economy

Methodology

- **Contact with 40 students (1999 – 2002) from a range of post-secondary education institutions in Victoria (Universities, TAFE's, Natural health education institutions)**
- **20 University of Melbourne students participated in a 3 year longitudinal study, with a minimum of 2 interviews each year.**
- **Methodology informed by Participatory Action Research Project – on *being* reflective & responsive.**
- **Mixed Methodological approach – interviews; observation; field work; memory work.**
- **Recruitment – Student Unions; Inner South Community Health (formally PCV) and worker referral**

Routes into the sex industry

Primarily driven by financial need:

- i) lack of, or ineligibility for government income support;
- ii) University fees and charges, including ancillary, HECS and upfront fees;
- iii) the inability of the family unit to financially support them;
- iv) the impact of changes to the youth labour market which is driven by flexible, insecure work practices and;
- v) visa restrictions for international students.

Routes into the Sex Industry

Ali...

‘My parents know I strip. I started about two years ago. They’re not happy about it and we don’t talk it, but they also know that I wouldn’t be going to University without this job’.

Routes into the Sex Industry

Wanda....

‘I usually subsidise the youth allowance [government income assistance] I get during semester by working occasionally in bars, or massage parlors or something like that. I’ve been doing it since I started Uni, and I usually pick up more work during the holidays so I don’t have to work so much during the semester’.

Routes into the Sex Industry

Ling...

SARAH: Do they [your parents] know that you work in the sex industry to pay the rest of your fees here in Australia?

LING: No, no, they wouldn't like that. But I can't ask them for any more money because I know they're struggling themselves, my sister tells me. But I thought, I can do this for a couple of years without them knowing, then I'll get out because I'll have a good degree and then I'll work in some corporate job or something that they'll be proud of.

Routes into the Sex Industry



Charlie...

‘I love working in strip clubs because I meet so many interesting women. Many who are also students like me...It’s like they’ve figured out what to do about University fees Take the money’.



Identities

- **Juggle multiple responsibilities and demands simultaneously (usually successfully)**
- **Have fragmented and multi-dimensional identities**

Bell...

‘Sometimes I love the work. It’s good money and flexible. And other times I hate it. I get bored or just tired of constantly performing. But I guess that’s the same as everything in life’.

Charlie....

‘Well, it’s like this. One night I’ll feel totally alive and empowered when I’m dancing. I love the feeling of being in control of my body, deciding who I dance for; what I do and I love that I can milk it for all its worth and all the money I want from those poor pissed blokes. But on other nights, the venue looks drab, clients are sleazy and pathetic and I feel like I’m a doll on the stage. But I think it’s like this for everyone...no matter what job they do. I think that’s life’.



‘Choices within Choices’

- **Participants are proactive in the face of uncertainty & change;**
- **Make pragmatic, contingent and reflexive choices in their lives;**
- **Challenge notions of the mainstream and ‘at risk’.**

Charlie....

‘I’m no different than any other student, I make choices within choices –we all do that in life. Some people have just got more choices than others have’.

Donna....

‘It’s not like I have the choice between being a CEO of a corporation and being a stripper. It’s more like working in McDonald’s on minimum wage and long hours or being a stripper’.

Donna....

‘At least I have choices, even if they are only in how I respond to any given circumstances that come my way’.



The impact that engaging in
the informal and illegal
economy has on young
people's health and wellbeing

Health & Safety Issues

- Burnout and exhaustion
- Violence & psychological trauma
- STI's
- Depression and mental health issues
- Increased substance use, particularly alcohol & smoking & prescription drugs such as Benzodiazepines (sleeping drugs)
- Isolation



Cath....

‘Burnout is definitely an issue in the industry. It can leave you drained...you give and give and give and work long hours, then you leave feeling drained’.

Charlie....

'I was constantly juggling work, study, relationship, my family and friends. It was difficult to keep them all separate and sometimes it all got mixed up and I didn't know who I was. It didn't help that I was always so tired...working at night and studying during the day either. Eventually I left because the pressure to constantly negotiate everything was too hard'.

Susie....

'I do a performance every-time I see a client. It's rarely ever 'wham-bam thankyou ma'am'! Sometimes I'd probably prefer it that way. The lies...the changing names...the always being aware not to slip up... it's really stressful sometimes. *[pausing]* Come to think of it though, it's not just at work, it's also maintaining that at home, with my lecturers and friends as well... it's all the time'.

Su Li....


‘Most of the time I don’t mind creating a new ‘me’ every time I see a client...but sometimes it gets confusing because I’m so tired and I feel strained. Sometimes I forget who I am and why I’m doing this job. I get really resentful. My life priorities get all mixed up....’.


In summary

- ❖ **Challenge traditional linear transitions of youth into adulthood;**
- ❖ **Emphasise personal authority amidst unpredictability and unexpected pathways;**
- ❖ **Take individual responsibility (*and blame*) for their actions;**
- ❖ **Have high aspirations;**
- ❖ **Optimistic about their futures.**



Possibilities for future
research

- 
- Limited understanding of young peoples access to, and participation in, the informal and illegal economy;
 - Limited research on changing government changes to the education and employment sector on young people. Eg. Upfront fees at Universities; new 'out of classroom' activities
 - 'How many?' young people are utilising the informal and illegal economy to make their way into adulthood

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- Redefine how we understand economic adversity, unemployment and crime;
 - contribute to knowledge on how young people negotiate their futures and transitions into adulthood;
 - challenges the ways young people are positioned, and the traditional frameworks that mark and measure youth 'success'