

SCHOOL LEAVERS: HOW ARE THEY FARING?

Delma Byrne and Selina McCoy†*

Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin, Ireland

Recent evidence from the School Leavers' Survey suggests that young people who enter the labour market after leaving school are likely to be particularly vulnerable in the current economic climate. Since the late 1970s the Economic and Social Research Institute has been carrying out research and publishing data on the employment and education outcomes of school leavers. A new report in this series* suggests that young people who leave school without a Leaving Certificate qualification tend to be more vulnerable to unemployment, and are therefore likely to be particularly vulnerable during the current recession.

ESRI researchers Delma Byrne, Selina McCoy and Dorothy Watson find that the level of educational qualification achieved is related to gender and parental socio-economic background. While the prevalence of early school leaving has reduced over the years and now remains relatively stable at 14 per cent for this cohort (representing almost 9,000 young people), males are more likely to leave school early than females, as are those from working class households and households with parental unemployment. Patterns over time suggest that males who leave school early have been increasingly more likely to cite the pull of the labour market as a reason for leaving school.

In 2006, just 5 per cent of young people who left school in the academic year 2004/05 were unemployed, a low rate which is not expected to be seen again for some time. However, the risk of unemployment is related to the level of education attained. The report shows that young people who leave school without gaining any qualifications have the highest level of unemployment and the lowest level of employment. The persistent vulnerability of this group of school leavers has been evident even in favourable economic conditions as measured by their position relative to those with a Leaving Certificate. In 2006, these young people were more than 5 times as likely to be unemployed as those with a Leaving Certificate.

The numbers entering apprenticeships after leaving school had peaked at close to 5,000 in 2006 (as shown by FÁS data); these were largely concentrated in the construction and electrical trades. Almost a quarter of young people with a Junior Certificate qualification had opted for the apprenticeship route, many of whom are male: the reliance of males with this level of education on the apprenticeship sector is likely to have

* Delma.Byrne@esri.ie

† Selina.McCoy@esri.ie

consequences for the future. With the sharp decline in the building industry, recent entrants to apprenticeship are likely to be particularly vulnerable.

Young people who have completed the Leaving Certificate fare much better than other school leavers because they have a higher level of education and have more post school choices open to them. Among those with a Leaving Certificate, the employment route tends to be taken by those who achieve lower grades while the education route is taken by those achieving better results in the Leaving Certificate examination. However, even this group are not protected from labour market vulnerability. While female school leavers rely on the distribution sector for employment, males rely on the industry sector for employment. In 2006 over half of all male school leavers in full-time employment were found in the industry sector, and the majority of these (60 per cent) were working in the construction sector.

The report outlines that young adults continue to be the group with the highest risk of unemployment and their unemployment rate has increased further since the time of the survey (QNHS Q4 2008). Adequate preparation in terms of educational and vocational qualifications will be more important than ever in ensuring that they are equipped to take advantage of a shrinking pool of job opportunities.

*D. Byrne, S. McCoy and D. Watson, 2009. *The School-leavers' Survey 2007*, Dublin: The Economic and Social Research Institute and the Department of Education and Science.