

# INEQUALITY AND THE STEREOTYPING OF YOUNG PEOPLE

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# Foreword

“Inequality and the Stereotyping of Young People” is both important and innovative. It is important in setting out and analysing a remarkable and disturbing consensus among young people as to how they are stereotyped by so many of the adults they come into contact with. It is innovative in bringing forward this issue in an Irish context and in giving a voice to young people in setting out and exploring their experiences of this stereotyping.

The stereotypes of a particular group, such as young people, that are held by a society have an impact on how all members of that group are viewed and treated by society, and on their status in that society. Stereotyping involves the imputation of unchanging and inflexible characteristics to all members of a particular group. Stereotypes can be negative and thus diminish the group. Stereotypes can be positive but end up patronising the individual as they are no more than a group label. Thus young people are deemed to be idealistic and dynamic at the same time as they are labelled as irresponsible, threatening and given to excess.

The pursuit of equality involves the pursuit of four interlinked objectives for groups that experience inequality – objectives of access to resources, of access to decision-making, of access to relationships of respect and solidarity and of access to a recognition by and status in society. Stereotypes and stereotyping, in diminishing and patronising young people, limit their access to any equality of standing or status in society. This limit, in turn, presents barriers to the achievement of other equality objectives. Access to

decision-making becomes more difficult where young people’s status and standing is undermined. Relationships of respect for and solidarity with young people are less likely in a context of stereotyping. Ultimately this situation can impact on access by young people to resources where they do not have a say in decision-making and where they do not enjoy relationships of respect and solidarity.

The Equality Authority and the National Youth Council of Ireland, each from their different mandates, have identified a shared concern with the stereotyping of young people by a range of different institutions and groups in society and with the manner in which such stereotyping disempowers and contributes to inequalities for young people.

The Equality Authority is the statutory body established to promote equality of opportunity and to combat discrimination in the areas covered by the Employment Equality Acts and the Equal Status Acts. The Employment Equality Acts prohibit discrimination in the workplace and the Equal Status Acts prohibit discrimination in the provision of goods and services, accommodation and education. Both Acts cover nine grounds including an age ground.

The National Youth Council of Ireland is the representative body for national voluntary youth organisations in Ireland. It represents and supports the interests of voluntary youth organisations and uses its collective experience to act on issues that impact on young people. It seeks to ensure that all young people are empowered to develop the skills and

confidence to fully participate as active citizens in an inclusive society.

“Inequality and the Stereotyping of Young People” has been commissioned, supported and published as a joint venture by the National Youth Council of Ireland and the Equality Authority to explore and respond to their shared concerns about these issues. The project seeks to generate and inform a debate on stereotyping of young people and the impact of this. It seeks to identify and stimulate initiatives that can challenge and eliminate the widespread stereotyping of young people and that address the impact of this stereotyping.

The research involved ten focus groups with approximately ninety young people. It identifies that, while there are exceptions, the young people involved see their institutional relationships with adults as for the most part unequal, troubled and rooted in stereotypical ideas about their attributes and abilities. Particular mention in this regard was made of the media, the local community, schools, politicians, the Gardaí and security staff in shopping centres.

The research includes a case study of the press. It finds that the dominant categories of news story are those portraying young people in roles of deviant or criminal (usually involving violence) and of victim (of assault, abuse or accident). Irish news stories were found to portray young people as being a problem or as having problems.

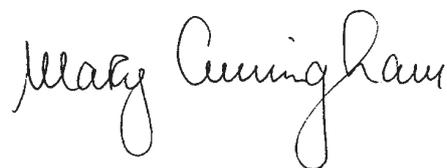
This case study was reinforced by the focus group discussions where it was clear that the young people involved saw the media representations of young people as distorted and misleading. The research makes the case that the media

have a particular responsibility to take care in their portrayal of groups, such as young people, that have limited influence and power in society.

“Inequality and the Stereotyping of Young People” identifies significant barriers to equality for young people. A strategy to address these barriers is set out in ten recommendations at the end of the report. The Equality Authority and the National Youth Council of Ireland will work to seek a positive response to these recommendations.

We are grateful to Maurice Devlin for his work on this project. He has brought an academic knowledge and wisdom, a practical expertise in engaging with young people and a huge energy and commitment to the work. This has underpinned the quality and potential impact of this publication.

We are also grateful to the young people who participated in the focus groups. We hope that they can find their voices accurately and adequately reflected in this publication. Finally we wish to thank those youth workers and youth organisations who so generously assisted in organising the focus groups.



Mary Cunningham,  
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# Chapter 1

## Introduction



This report investigates the negative stereotyping of young people in Ireland. It includes the findings of research into the experiences of young people and their perceptions of how they are regarded and treated by adults, as well as the results of a case study of the stereotyping of young people in the Irish media. It attempts to put the nature and impact of stereotyping into a theoretical context, and presents the empirical results of a selection of relevant research from a number of other countries. On the basis of the research findings in Ireland and elsewhere it makes a number of recommendations for ways in which the negative stereotyping of young people might be countered.

### **The Equality Legislation**

The equality legislation provides an important context for this report. The Employment Equality Acts 1998 and 2004 prohibit discrimination (with exemptions) in the workplace. The Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004 prohibit discrimination (with some exemptions) in the provision

of goods and services, accommodation and educational establishments. Both Acts prohibit discrimination on nine grounds: gender, family status, marital status, sexual orientation, religion, race, age, disability and membership of the Traveller community.

Both Acts define discrimination as where one person is treated less favourably than another person is, has been or would be treated in a comparable situation on any of the nine grounds which exists, existed, may exist in the future, or is imputed to the person concerned. Indirect discrimination and discrimination by association are also prohibited.

Both Acts prohibit harassment and sexual harassment. Harassment occurs where a person subjects the victim to any form of unwanted conduct, related to any of the nine discriminatory grounds, that has the purpose or effect of violating a person's dignity and creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for the victim. Sexual harassment is similarly defined and relates to any unwanted

conduct of a sexual nature. In both cases the unwanted conduct may include acts, requests, spoken words, gestures or the production, display or circulation of written words, pictures or other materials. Both Acts also prohibit victimisation.

The Employment Equality Acts require employers to take appropriate measures to allow people with disabilities to access employment, advance in employment or participate in training provided it does not impose a disproportionate burden on the employer. The Equal Status Acts require providers of goods and services, a person selling or letting or providing accommodation, and educational establishments to provide special treatment or facilities to people with disabilities where without these it would be impossible or unduly difficult to avail of the goods, services, accommodation or educational establishments. Both Acts allow positive action. Employers can take action to achieve full equality in practice for all employees from any of the nine grounds. The Equal Status Acts allow positive action to promote equality of opportunity for disadvantaged persons or to cater for the special needs of persons.

Under the Employment Equality Acts discrimination on the age ground applies to all ages above the school-leaving age, which is set at 16 under the Education (Welfare) Act 2000. There are a number of exemptions. Under the Equal Status Acts, discrimination on the age ground applies only to people over 18 (except for the provision of car insurance to licensed drivers under that age). Again, there are a number of exemptions.

## Methodology

Apart from desk research, there are two main strands to the research on which this report is based: focus groups with young people and content analysis of media sources. Information about the content analysis methodology is given in Chapter 4. This section gives information about the focus groups.

Focus group research is a qualitative method which is commonly used when the research is relatively exploratory (i.e. when there is little existing research into the topic in question) and when it is thought that the group process and interaction might in itself help to throw light on the research topic (Bryman 2001, ch. 16). It has advantages as a method when a relatively 'natural' setting is required which can allow people to express their opinions and ideas freely, particularly members of marginalised groups (Neuman 2003: 396). All of these considerations applied in the present context. While focus groups by their nature pose possible problems of 'group effects' (members too talkative or too reticent, the suppression of dissenting views etc.) these can be alleviated through careful moderation/facilitation. Focus groups can also be useful in the interpretation of findings from other methods (e.g. surveys, content analysis) and they can help to generate questions for further investigation. More broadly, if properly used they can facilitate 'public participation in the research process' (Bloor et al., 2001: 13).

There were ten focus groups for this study, with a total of approximately ninety young people. They were conducted in May and June 2005, each lasting between sixty and ninety minutes. The intention was, within the practical constraints and

the time available, to include young people from a range of types of area and parts of the country and also to include young people with different identities and circumstances. Accordingly, there were seven 'area-based' focus-groups, one of which included several young people who were asylum-seekers; and three focus groups whose members were, respectively, young Travellers, young people with disabilities and young LGBT people (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender). In all cases, contact was established through the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) and its member organisations. Youth workers were asked to seek volunteers for participation in the focus groups. The number of participants ranged from four to twelve. The vast majority were in their mid teens (individual ages of participants are not specified in this report). The use of pre-existing groups is now generally favoured in focus group research 'both on practical and epistemological levels' (Bloor et al. 2001: 22).

In accordance with standard practice, the facilitators (who were the researcher Maurice Devlin and Mary Cunningham of NYCI; except for one group facilitated by Niamh McCrea of NYCI) took a relatively unstructured approach, allowing the discussion to flow as freely as possible but intervening to seek clarification of important points or further information on especially salient contributions. They asked the participants open-ended questions such as 'what groups of adults do you have a lot of contact with?', 'what attitudes do you think adults [or a specific category of adult identified by the participants] have towards young people?', 'do you think people your age are regarded [or treated] any differently from people of other ages?', and so on.

All the focus group discussions were tape-recorded (with the consent of the participants) and in Chapter 3 the emphasis is placed on the young people's own verbatim accounts, with examples both of individual contributions and of exchanges between the participants. All names are pseudonymous.

The location of the focus groups and the contact organisations were: Bluebell, Dublin (Bluebell Youth Project); Cork (two groups, Foróige and Ógra Chorcaigh); Drogheda (Drogheda Youth Development); Leeson Park, Dublin (Scouting Ireland); Ratoath, Co. Meath (Foróige); Ronanstown, Co. Dublin (Ronanstown Youth Service, CYC); Pavee Point, BeLonG To and the Irish Wheelchair Association. Sincere thanks are due to all the young people for their time and insights and to the youth workers and organisations who facilitated the research.

## Outline of Report

The following chapter, Chapter 2, places stereotyping in theoretical context and relates it to other social scientific concepts such as discourse, power and inequality.

**Chapter 3** presents the findings of the focus group research under a number of thematic headings, indicating the ways in which young people in general believe they are perceived and treated by adults as well the particular experiences and opinions of young people with different identities and circumstances.

**Chapter 4** presents a detailed case study of the stereotyping of young people in the Irish media, with a particular focus on newspaper coverage.

**Chapter 5** gives a summary of the findings of relevant recent research into the stereotyping of young people in Britain, Australia and the USA.

Finally, **Chapter 6** provides a summary of the research findings and makes a number of recommendations for steps to counter the negative stereotyping of young people.



# Chapter 2

## Stereotyping: An Overview



### The Nature of Stereotyping

Stereotyping is an important concept in contemporary sociology and social psychology, but the word first came into use more than 200 years ago with a different meaning and context. 'Stereotype', if we look at its origins in Greek and Latin, literally means 'rigid impression' or 'solid image', and at one time this document might itself have been printed with a device called a stereotype: a plate or cast made from a mould of an original text and used to produce additional – and identical – copies.

In social science, and for obvious reasons, the same term is used figuratively to refer to a 'relatively rigid and oversimplified conception of a group of people, in which all individuals in the given group are labelled with the so-called group characteristics' (Wrightsmann and Deaux 1981: 72). The concept of stereotype is therefore closely associated with that of *prejudice*, which refers literally to a 'pre-judgement': 'a rigid and irrational generalisation about

an entire category of people...with little regard for the facts' (Macionis and Plummer 2005: 277). Prejudices are commonly held about individuals of a particular social class, sex, sexual orientation, disability, skin colour, ethnicity, religion, family status, political affiliation, or – most relevant in the present context – age.

### Both Positive and Negative

Stereotypes and prejudices need not necessarily be negative. Many stereotypes attribute positive qualities to an entire group, such as the 'athleticism of Black people', or the 'warmth and charm of the Irish', or – in the case of young people – the 'idealism of youth'. Often such stereotypes can be seen to 'romanticise' the group in question. While this might seem harmless enough, it still amounts to a simplification of a complex social reality, and in many cases is patronising in tone and disempowering in effect.

A further point about stereotypes is that they need not only be held about groups other than one's own. People can make use of stereotypical ideas and images – both positive and negative – about their own group(s) as well as others. On balance, it does seem that 'our positive prejudices tend to exaggerate the virtues of people like ourselves, while our negative prejudices condemn those who differ from us' (Macionis and Plummer 2005: 277). However, to complicate matters, both positive and negative stereotypes can sometimes be held about the same group at the same time.

This point has been made by the sociologist Stuart Hall. Stereotyping, he says, is often characterised by *ambivalence*, in other words by opposing or contradictory images or attitudes:

People who are in any way different from the majority – 'them' rather than 'us' – are frequently exposed to [a] binary form of representation. They seem to be represented through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes – good/bad, civilized/primitive, ugly/excessively attractive, repelling-because-different/compelling because strange and exotic. And they are often required to be both things at the same time! (Hall 1997: 17)

A very similar point was made some years ago by Stan Cohen in one of the earliest detailed studies of media portrayals of young people. A stereotype, he suggested, provides a 'readily available composite image' of a group or category. However:

...there is no necessary logical connection between the components; they are often contradictory. Thus Jews

are intrusive, but also inclusive; Negroes are lazy and inert, but also aggressive and pushing; Mods are dirty and scruffy, but also slickly dressed; they are aggressive and inflated with their own strength and importance, but they are also cowardly. An image rationalizes a particular explanation or course of action; if an opposite image is perceived as being more appropriate to this end, then it is easily invoked. Such images are even mobile enough to be held simultaneously... (Cohen 1980: 57)

Later sections of this report will show how stereotypes of young people in Ireland today are often similarly contradictory.

### **Discourse: Ideas, Images and Practices**

In addressing the nature of stereotyping it is useful to introduce the sociological concept of discourse. This concept has recently been centrally employed in an extensive study of community attitudes to young people in Australia (Bolzan 2003). In common usage, discourse means much the same as 'discussion' or 'debate'. In social theory, its meaning is more complex. Drawing substantially on the thinking of the influential French philosopher Michel Foucault (1970, 1972), Stuart Hall offers the following definition:

Discourses are ways of referring to or constructing knowledge about a particular topic or practice: a cluster (or *formation*) of ideas, images and practices, which provide ways of thinking about, forms of knowledge and conduct associated with, a particular topic, social activity or institutional site in society. (Hall 1997: 6)

The phrase ‘ideas, images and practices’ is very important. A discourse in this context refers not just to a way of thinking about a given topic (perhaps a stereotypical way of thinking) or to an image based on such thinking, but also to a practice or set of practices (*ways of behaving*) which are shaped by or complementary to such ideas and images.

Discourse, then, has a ‘materiality’, meaning that when we talk about – for instance – the ‘discourse(s) of youth’ or the ‘discourse(s) of adolescence’ in contemporary Ireland, we are referring not just to prevalent *ideas* about young people but to practices and institutions associated with, and in themselves reproducing, those ideas. Discourses about young people are embodied in the schooling system, youth work services, social work and social care services for young people, the juvenile justice system, employment legislation and other aspects of the law, the ‘youth industries’ such as young people’s television and radio, fashion and popular music, ‘teen magazines’ and so on.

In all these cases, there are a wide range of institutions which embody sets of ideas about young people, and practices – patterns of behaviour; rules, roles and responsibilities – associated with both the young people and the adults involved. Furthermore, and as suggested above, the ideas and practices may not be consistent and may vary considerably from one institution or ‘site’ to another; or even *within* the same site (reflecting the ambivalence already mentioned). It is clear therefore that the impact of stereotypical thinking can be profound; it can affect every aspect of the lives of stereotyped individuals and groups, a point which will be returned to below.

## Relationships

The precise nature of any stereotype, and its impact, will depend largely on the social and cultural context in which it is used, and especially on the *type of relationship* that exists between those being stereotyped and those doing the stereotyping (and the stereotyping can, in turn, then further influence the relationship). A prominent British sociologist, noting that all human thinking and all human relations involve *some* degree of classification or categorisation, has given the following example:

Stereotypical thinking may be harmless if it is ‘neutral’ in terms of emotional content and distant from the interests of the individual[s] concerned. The British may have stereotypical views of what the Americans are like, for example, but this might be of little consequence for most people of either nationality. (Giddens 1993: 256)

This is probably because the British and Americans, at a political and societal level, have come to regard each other as friends, allies and equals, with many more common interests than antagonistic ones. Stereotyping tends to have a very different complexion, and to be of ‘more consequence’ in Giddens’ terms, when the parties involved have an inequitable relationship: that is, when one has substantially more *power* than the other. In such circumstances, stereotyping may reflect the power of one group to *create and apply labels* to another group; a process which may not work equally in reverse.

## Labels and Language

Labels and stereotypes – like all communication – rely on *language* of one kind or another.

Language...operates as a representational system. In language, we use signs and symbols – whether they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects – to stand for or to represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings. Language is one of the ‘media’ through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in a culture. Representation through language is therefore central to the processes by which meaning is produced. (Hall 1997: 1)

This reference to the ‘processes by which meaning is produced’ is very important, and draws our attention to the social - and political – significance of language. In fact, it has been argued that language is *the* social institution above all others:

Language is both the foundation and the instrumentality of the social construction of reality. Language focalizes, patterns and objectivates individual experience. Language is the principal means by which an individual is socialized to become an inhabitant of a world shared with others...It is useful to remind oneself of the linguistic base of all social order...because language makes particularly clear what is meant by the social construction of an objectively real world. (Berger 1971: 108)

This view has been taken up by writers in ‘critical linguistics’ who regard language not just as a verbal and grammatical system but as ‘an institution, a vehicle

and a symbol for the social structure...a realization of the power structure of a society’ (Halliday 1978: 181). From this perspective, language simultaneously performs *ideational* functions (communicating information, ideas, thoughts and opinions) and *interpersonal* functions (expressing and sustaining relations between or among individuals and groups). [A third, ‘textual’ function, need not concern us here.] For example, a bullying adult manager hurling verbal abuse at a younger employee is both expressing ideas or opinions and enacting a particular kind of unequal relationship.

One important aspect of language which illustrates how these ideational and interpersonal functions overlap is *lexicalisation*. This is ‘simply the existence of a word for a concept...and of sets of words for families of concepts’ (Fowler 1986: 151). In any one language and in any one society or culture, there may be relatively few or relatively many words referring to a given phenomenon.

*Overlexicalisation* is ‘the availability, or the use of, a profusion of terms for an object or concept’ (Fowler 1986: 154), and it tends to occur where there is a particular social or cultural preoccupation with the object or concept in question, or where a particular category or group is regarded as highly distinctive or different. For instance, in English there is a proliferation of words for designating females as compared with males, and many of them are pejorative. Roger Fowler argues therefore that lexicalisation is ‘an integral part of the reproduction of ideology’, and ‘the basis of discriminatory practice when dealing with so-called “groups” of people as women, young people, ethnic minorities and so forth’ (1991: 84-85). Language, as

already suggested, can be the basis not just for communicating ideas but for expressing and sustaining unequal social relations.

It is for this reason that Pierre Bourdieu, one of the most influential sociologists of the late 20th century, issued the following exhortation:

The social sciences...must examine the part played by words in the construction of reality and the contribution which the struggle over classifications, a dimension of all class struggles, makes to the constitution of classes – classes defined in terms of age, sex or social position, but also clans, tribes, ethnic groups or nations...By structuring the perception which social agents have of the social world, the act of naming helps to establish the structure of the world, and does so all the more significantly the more widely it is recognized, i.e. authorized. (Bourdieu 1991: 105)

## **Stereotyping and Inequality**

It should be clear by now that stereotyping is most prevalent and most significant in the context of social inequalities. History – including Irish history – contains numerous examples which bear this out. Stuart Hall (1997) has conducted a detailed analysis of the ways in which stereotyping has been used historically by White people (including colonisers and slave owners) to construct and sustain ideas of racial difference, resulting in what he calls a ‘spectacle of the “Other”’ which represents Black people as lazy, servile, childish, untrustworthy and unreliable, and so on. He stresses, however, that his main points about the process and

dynamics of stereotyping ‘could equally be applied in many instances to other dimensions of difference, such as gender, sexuality, class and disability’ (Hall 1997: 225). He might well have added ‘age’ to this list.

Hall suggests that stereotyping commonly involves the two related strategies of ‘essentializing’ and ‘naturalizing’ differences. The first of these refers to the way in which stereotypes reduce the members of a social group to some supposed ‘essence’ (such as the examples just given: laziness, untrustworthiness etc). The second suggests that these qualities are absolutely inherent, ‘naturally’ built into the characters or personalities of the stereotyped, and therefore, of course, not amenable to change. This notion has obvious advantages for those holding the stereotypical views: existing unequal relations can be sustained, and further thought is unnecessary. As a well-known Irish study has put it, stereotypes such as these ‘rationalize prejudice and discrimination and suit our lethargic minds’. (Mac Gréil 1977: 99)

This latter point draws attention to one of the most important ways in which stereotyping has an impact on the stereotyped: it can result in, and be used to justify, discriminatory practices. For example, the idea that ‘a woman’s place is in the home’ (based on stereotypical notions about the ‘essential’ and ‘natural’ differences between men and women) has in the past been used to support the idea that women’s participation in the paid workforce is of lesser value than men’s, or even to question their entitlement to be there at all; and this has been reflected in differential wages, conditions of employment and

opportunities for advancement. This idea of women's place 'continues to exert an influence over policy and law' (Tovey and Share 2003: 200). Women's participation in public life in general (not just the paid workforce) has been hindered by stereotypical thinking and the discriminatory practices associated with it. Stereotyping can also have a further impact, as when prejudicial ideas lead to (or are used to justify) a profound lack of respect for, or even violence against, the members of a given group. The depth and scope of the impact of stereotyping are such that it is a significant barrier to the achievement of equality.

## An Equality Focus

The Equality Authority has adopted a framework for equality based on work done by the National Economic and Social Forum with the support of the Equality Studies Centre at University College Dublin. This framework consists of four equality objectives:

### Redistribution

Concerned with the *economic sphere* and the equal distribution of resources. This equality objective focuses on access to jobs, income and economic development and on access to education, health and accommodation.

### Representation

Concerned with the *political sphere* and the generation of capacity and systems to ensure equal representation and participation in decision-making. This equality objective focuses on access to decision-making and shaping one's own community and the institutions a person is involved in.

### Respect

Concerned with the *'affective'*, caring and emotional sphere and with generating the opportunities for all to develop their full emotional potential and allowing people to support each other and care for each other, particularly when vulnerable. This equality objective focuses on access to relationships of love, care, respect and solidarity.

### Recognition

Concerned with the *cultural sphere* and with equality in facilitating an exploration and affirmation of all identities. This equality objective focuses on access to status and a valuing and an accommodation of difference.

These four objectives are regarded as being interlinked, with each one of them shaping and informing the others; but also as capable of being addressed in their own right for the purposes of action and/or analysis.

The act of stereotyping (as opposed to its impact) most obviously relates to 'recognition' and cultural equality. The Equality Authority has previously drawn attention to the persistence of negative stereotyping in this society (of Black and minority ethnic communities and of women respectively); and highlighted in particular the importance of the media as well as of educational, cultural and commercial organisations in reproducing and sustaining such stereotypes and – by the same token – in potentially challenging and changing them (*Building an Intercultural Society* and *Towards a Vision for a Gender Equal Society*). Both these documents also stress the diversity of the groups in question (which is of course precisely what stereotypes ignore):

No person is simply defined, nor is any community homogeneous. An individual's experience of racism is informed by a multiplicity of factors, including gender, age, sexual orientation, religion, disability and marital or family status. (Equality Authority, *Building an Intercultural Society*)

Stereotyping diminishes the status of the group that is being stereotyped. It limits the potential for a valuing of the group's difference and for any action to make adjustments to take this difference into account. Stereotyping can damage the relationships between the stereotyped group and other groups in society as false assumptions rather than realities serve as the basis for relating. Access to decision making is hindered where stereotyping presents a barrier to the voice of the stereotyped group being given an adequate hearing. This in turn can limit access to resources where the stereotyped group has little say in decisions on how resources are distributed and on the terms on which resources are made available.





# Chapter 3

## Young People's Perspectives



The previous chapter defined a stereotype as a 'relatively rigid and oversimplified conception of a group of people, in which all individuals in the given group are labelled with the so-called group characteristics' (Wrightsmann and Deaux 1981: 72). It was suggested that stereotypes can be both positive and negative (and sometimes *ambivalent*, in other words both positive and negative simultaneously). It was also suggested that stereotypes are most prevalent, and most damaging, in the context of unequal relationships between different groups. Stereotypes can have a very negative impact on the lives of those being stereotyped because the prejudicial *ideas* on which they are based frequently result in, and reinforce, discriminatory *practices*; and because these ideas and practices can be seen at work across all the main aspects of people's lives.

Later chapters of this report provide some empirical evidence of the stereotyping of young people in Ireland and elsewhere. In this chapter the emphasis is on the experiences, opinions and voices of young

people themselves. Based on ten focus group discussions in different parts of the country and with a variety of types of group (as outlined in Chapter 1), it presents young people's responses to relatively open-ended questions about the groups of adults they have regular contact with, the ways they think they are perceived and treated by adults, and their general views on relationships between adults and young people. The facilitators of the focus groups did not labour the concept of stereotyping itself, although it was introduced in some discussions, sometimes by the young people themselves. The key purpose of the focus groups was to facilitate the young people to speak in and on their own terms. There is little doubt, however, that what the young people described, whatever the terminology used, amounts in many cases to stereotyping as defined in this publication.

The themes and categories which emerged in the discussions were: the media, the local community, the Gardaí, shopping centres and security staff,

politicians, and teachers/school. Attention was also paid to the ways in which young people with particular identities or circumstances had different experiences of stereotyping and of relationships with adults (and with other young people), and account is taken of this in what follows.

## Media Portrayals

When the young people were asked about how they thought adults perceived them, and how they became aware of those perceptions, they most commonly identified the media first, and were almost always of the view that media portrayals were very negative.

### **Alan:**

*All of the attention that young people get in terms of the media, most of the time its usually negative, in terms of, they highlight the joyriders, underage drinking, they never really focus on anything positive to do with young people, its usually all negative that makes the press anyway.*

### **Eamon:**

*They've nothing positive to say about us. Everything's really negative...It's just down to making stories and selling papers and getting more and more people to look at them. They really look into what kids are doing. Everybody wants to know what the kids are doing. They make a big meal out of it. They're looking for stories, to get more publicity, to sell newspapers.*

### **Christopher:**

*It's all trouble, vandalism, joyriding, drinking, drugs, smoking. They never have any of the good stuff we do in it.*

When it was suggested that this sounded like rather a bleak picture, the view tended to be that while there were positive images, they were limited in scope and less prominently featured in the media:

### **Steve:**

*The youngsters in the football, on the back pages.*

### **Claire:**

*Or big swots, from Blackrock or somewhere.*

### **Susan:**

*Sometimes there's stories about kids doing well in their exams and stuff.*

### **Anne:**

*There are the Garda divisional awards that happen once a year associated with the Evening Echo and that's something...*

### **Emily:**

*The good ones don't get as much attention as the negative ones though, the negative ones get more of the hype. That's true of all media, bad stuff gets preference over good stuff, but it's still even more so when it comes to children because some people aren't even interested in hearing the great stuff that other kids are doing.*

### **Eamon:**

*There's not really much room, the negative things grab all the space, you can't really see through them. You do see things in the paper, kids are great, but they're tiny, they're that size, compared to the bad things.*

As well as being 'tiny', the view was expressed that positive stories might be confined to children's media rather than 'mainstream' adult news. The following exchange is an example.

**Emma:**

*It's the same words all the time used, and if you actually look at the pictures that they use it's the same pictures over and over – young people in [names area] with cars all around them.*

**Enda:**

*And there's nothing in the media about young people and adults working together. Like we went up to the Dáil trying to improve things but there was nothing in the papers about that.*

**Emma:**

*It was on Den 2! We're seventeen year-olds. Seventeen year-olds are hardly going to sit down watching Den 2.*

**Enda:**

*And adults aren't going to watch Den 2, like, unless their kids are on it.*

**Facilitator:**

*So Dáil na nÓg was on Den 2 and young people drinking was on Prime Time?*

**All:**

*Yeah.*

### **An Accurate Picture?**

The young people were asked about the extent to which the media portrayal of their behaviour as predominantly 'problematic', and as being 'worse' than previous generations, was accurate. The range of answers included the view that it was inaccurate and distorted (treating the behaviour of a minority as if it was typical); that it was true (or not entirely false) but reflective of the broader society and culture and therefore that focusing so much on young people was unfair; and that, if it was true, there was insufficient attention to the possible

reasons for it (e.g. increased pressures and choices) and that the media's sensationalism might actually be making it worse.

**Anne:**

*There was a survey out two or three weeks ago about students and how they drink more. It was actually on the decrease but the survey put a different slant on it. It's just how the media perceived us.*

**Neil:**

*What about smoking? Years ago everybody smoked because they didn't know how bad it was and now they know how bad it is. Like every young person would have smoked years ago and now they don't. You don't hear much about that.*

**Alan:**

*It's not in all cases. It's a certain number of young people who give everyone else a bad reputation...A certain amount of it is true, because I know from my own experience seeing other young people, nowadays it's just a case that you get too much too young so we're spoiled rotten...*

**Emily:**

*The culture in Ireland is predominantly drinking, it's the main socialising thing, it's been here for centuries, and then for kids who are being forced by the media to grow up sooner than they were because they're supposed to be getting jobs and doing other things...The drinking culture, that's going to happen because that's the way Ireland is. That's [about] changing centuries, that's not changing where kids are nowadays. That's changing history like.*

It was often suggested that adults' behaviour was no less problematic than young people's:

**Michael:**

*Sure adults are as bad themselves. Did you ever see...sure they're always in the news, going around killing people, robbing, drugs...and they're always going on about anti-social behaviour.*

**Emma:**

*Take drugs. It's not young people bringing them into the country. Like, fair enough, they have a choice, but it's not them bringing it into the country, it's adults.*

The notion of increased 'choice' was often related to increased pressures and demands, to life being more complicated:

**Steve:**

*It was simpler years ago, they didn't have as much of a choice as we have.*

**Enda:**

*You need a lot of money these days like. Like if you see someone wearing good clothes you're gonna want the same. So you don't feel left out...whereas back in the old days you didn't have to worry about money.*

**Lisa:**

*There's got to be a reason why kids are drinking underage, so if they tackled that problem then that could reduce it...there's depression, peer pressure, school pressure, exams and stuff, pressure from the media... Sometimes the media makes it look normal that young people do this all the time, it's on the news so much.*

Overall, therefore, the young people's views suggest that the media's portrayal of them is very much a simplification, and usually an unfair one, of their lives and circumstances.

Among the young Travellers, there was an added problem that, as far they could see, all Travellers are negatively

portrayed by the media, and that (at least in the media) age didn't seem to matter, especially when somebody had done 'something wrong'.

**Mary:**

*It'd be the same no matter what it is, young, old or middle-aged. Whatever happens with a Traveller it's on the front page headline news.*

## The Local Community

When the topic of how they thought they were seen by adults at a local and community level was discussed, by far the most frequent and spontaneous response had to do with 'hassle' in public places, with high visibility because of being in groups, and with the tensions associated with 'hanging around' and being 'moved on'. This was also consistently linked with the fact that there was little else to do, or at least little else that was attractive and accessible.

**Karen:**

*...All of us get tarred with the same brush. You're a teenager, you hang around in a group, you must be a vandal.*

**Eamon:**

*Everybody stares at you, there's no where to go like. As adults, they can go to the pub, they've more things to do with their time. We haven't. That's why, there's nothing really for us to do, nothing else to do but drink. We're just knocking about and you can see us more, we're just kids. We don't have nowhere to go. Adults can hide but we can't. Whatever we want to do we have to do it outside.*

**Susan:**

*If they see us hanging around...but like there's nowhere else to go...they feel intimidated...they write into the local*

newspaper, but it's not our fault, we have [the youth club] once a week, there's six other nights, like, with nothing else to do but hang around. And we're not always doing bad stuff, we're hanging around, we may just be talking, but it's never seen as 'oh well they may be talking'...[It's] 'oh you're drunk, you're on drugs, you're smoking something, you're going to break into someone's house, you're intimidating'.

**Enda:**

When you see young people hanging around street corners, when they start drinking and all that sort of stuff, you say look at them they've nothing better to be doing. That's because they probably don't, like. There's probably fighting going on in their family, or probably trouble going on with their mom and dad, a hard life, like.

**Carmel:**

Everybody's expecting you to cause trouble. They're looking out their windows to see what you're doing, expecting something to happen, something bad to happen. They just expect the worst from us.

The focus group participants frequently returned to the theme that since they enjoy spending time with their friends, in groups ('walking around in a gang, that's what it's all about'), and since there is often nowhere for them to go as a group, they are constantly placed in situations full of potential for 'hassle' with adults. The gender composition of the group was also seen as an important factor, as was the proximity to residential areas (and the absence of an alternative location to meet):

**Facilitator 1:**

It's particularly bad when you're in a group?

**All:**

Yeah! [unanimous agreement]

**Facilitator 2:**

How big does the group have to be?

**Joan:**

Four or five.

**Niall:**

Five, yeah.

**Caoimhe:**

As long as there's lads in the group people will be...intimidated.

**Facilitator 2:**

So if the girls were on their own, people wouldn't be quite as concerned?

**Caoimhe:**

No. I think boys probably get a rougher time, more so than girls.

**Facilitator 2:**

What do the boys think?

**Darragh:**

It depends. If it's a big group mixed with girls.....

**Facilitator 2:**

If it's boys on their own?

**Darragh:**

Then it's worse. And it depends where you're standing. If you're standing maybe at the front of a housing estate it'd be worse but maybe if you're standing on a green or something it's not so bad, kicking a football or something.

**Facilitator 1:**

So if you're closer to people's houses...

**Several:**

Or shops...or sitting on a wall...near a shop...

**Facilitator 1:**

And then particularly if there are fellas in the group, maybe a good few fellas?

**What if there were six or seven or eight girls, sitting on a wall beside the shop?**

**Joan:**

*Not as much...it depends what they were doing.*

**Caoimhe:**

*If they were making loads of noise...*

**Others:**

*Yeah!*

Most young people were quite ready to agree that they do often make 'loads of noise' and engage in behaviour which might be seen by many adults as a nuisance, but they tended to think the response was disproportionate, and their accounts were often characterised by humour and irony.

**Declan:**

*You can't really say everyone's a goody-goody. There is always the odd few that'll be running around the street at all hours of the morning! [Laughter from others]*

**Gary:**

*Sometimes you might be, like at night time you might be making too much noise, like if they have children. But like sometimes it's 4 o'clock in the day.*

**Angela:**

*It's because you're young. Like, what do they want you to do, sit at home all the time?*

**Donal:**

*You never get a break no matter what you do...When you're young it's supposed to be the best time of your life, but everything you do they give out to you for doing, so how are you supposed to have fun when you're young? And they don't give you anything to do.*

The fact that they seemed always to be perceived as trouble-makers (or potential trouble-makers) was very 'wide of the mark' to the young people.

**Gemma:**

*Like, you can understand it, but like nothing's going to happen to them. Nothing ever happens to old folk in [area]. If anything we'd probably be looking out like, if we seen anything wrong, anybody getting robbed or anything.*

**Michelle:**

*Yeah, my own granny lives round here.*

In one of the focus groups, a youth worker gave an example of how young people's behaviour, even when they are involved in 'legitimate' activities organised by youth groups and schools, with a community dimension and with adult supervision, can be a cause of tension when they move outdoors.

...It was going to be a community day and we were going to welcome people on stilts and give them flyers and take photographs on stilts. So we had the workshop over in the school two or three evenings during the week. Then [it came to] the first night they went out on stilts and there was great laughter and a bit of craic and excitement and people were falling over and diving and...next of all the police arrived on the scene and they got out and [said] 'Who's in charge here?' and I said 'I am' and he said 'Is everything alright?' and I said 'Yeah, grand' and he said 'It's just, we've had a call that there's been a lot of young people making noise'. And I said 'That's laughter, young people having fun'.

Relationships between young people and adults in one area had deteriorated, it was suggested, because of the very rapid development of housing estates, but with very few amenities.

**Mary:**

*I think things have gotten worse as new estates have been built...because there's more teenagers now and there's still nothing to do, there'd be bigger gangs and that's probably why the relationship has faded.*

**Facilitator:**

*So there's more young people...*

**Dave:**

*And there's still nothing to do. It's all houses.*

**Mary:**

*And it's ok to say oh there's sports facilities, because yeah we do have brilliant sports facilities here [the club met in a sports centre], but not everybody...*

**Dave:**

*...not everybody plays sports [lots of agreement].*

The tension between the young people and local adults – while present everywhere, it would seem, to one degree or another – varied considerably by area. In one Dublin neighbourhood characterised by considerable socio-economic disadvantage (reflected in the condition of the 'prefab' premises used by the youth group itself), the young people expressed, in particularly strong terms, their resentment of how they were seen and treated by some adults. They had their own term for these particular adults – the local 'rats' – and used it regularly throughout the discussion ('we can't even stand around...too many rats...too many informers scumbags...rats in the flats...').

From the young people's perspective, they were being used:

**Grainne:**

*They're all only doing it [complaining] so they can get houses, like reporting us and all so they can get gaffs, get out of the flats...and we're like getting into trouble for it.*

**Youth worker:**

*There would have been cases in the past where people would've said they were intimidated and couldn't come out of the flats because their balcony would've been full of young people and stuff like that. And cases would've been [considered] and they would've been rehoused.*

**Grainne:**

*They were getting...like they're using us but we're getting into trouble over it.*

Not all young people's relationships with local adults are as fraught as this. As already suggested, the nature of the locality itself, and the socio-economic circumstances of those living there, seem crucial. Factors such as the facilities available, the nature of public space, the variety of options open to young people for places to meet, the extent to which they are engaged in formal education or in other structured pastimes, and the question of whether they can (and do) travel out of their own area to pursue such pastimes, all appear to be involved. These are all factors closely associated with social class. This also has a bearing on relationships *between* young people, and perceptions different groups of young people have of *each other*.

One group of young people involved in a Dublin scouting troop were reasonably happy with relationships with local adults, especially adults who also had children their age and therefore might

know them personally. Some people were rude – ‘they wouldn’t talk to you, they wouldn’t say hi on the street’ – but these were exceptions. There was a public square in their area and they had used it quite a lot in the evenings during the year but not so much near the time of the focus groups because of school exams. From their point of view, the behaviour of other young people in the square was a problem.

**Elaine:**

*Sometimes there’s teenagers around, sort of around, like [aged between] 14 and 19, and they just hang out in the middle and they usually drink and smoke and stuff, so the police come and they tell them to go away but they don’t. So no-one really wants to be in the park when they’re there, because they just play music and stuff.*

**Niamh:**

*They play music until about 2 o’clock in the morning and it’s, like, blaring out.*

**Elaine:**

*They basically, like, live in the park...*

**Niamh:**

*Yeah, you can’t really go over there when they’re out...sometimes they have like trolleys of beer and they come and sit down, blaring out music...and they hide all their beer so when the Gardaí come they can’t find it.*

The tensions between different groups of young people, and their perceptions of each other, also emerged in one focus group when the members of a youth club described how non-members might regard it.

**Susan:**

*I think some people we know think that...they see [the club] as just a little young place to go, but like, they kind of mock*

*it...but because there’s nothing else to do...*

**Joan:**

*Like it’s uncool.*

**Susan:**

*Yeah and they’re, because they’re in a gang, they’re all going around in a group together and they’re all going to think it’s stupid. Even if one of them wants to go they wouldn’t say it.*

**Joan:**

*They’re like sheep! [laughter]*

**Dave:**

*And they prevent other people from joining.*

**Sinead:**

*Or people would drop out because of them.*

It is important to emphasise, however, that this latter group of young people were also among those who said they received most ‘hassle’ in public from adults; and both the groups just referred to regarded the views of adults *in general* towards young people *in general* as mostly negative, and as being reflected in unequal treatment in a variety of ways.

The young people with disabilities shared this view of how adults perceive young people as a whole. However, they had their own distinctive perspectives and experiences. The group included participants with a very wide range of disabilities, and this in itself was reflected in the discussion. Those young people whose disability was most visible – most obvious to others – were more aware of being treated differently because of their disability, rather than because of their age. In fact, the view was expressed – and appeared to be widely endorsed – that not being regarded and

treated like other young people, even if this regard and treatment was sometimes negative – was an important dimension of the exclusion experienced by young people with disabilities.

**Daniel:**

*Most people think, the guy there in the wheelchair, oh yeah he's a little angel [laughter]. If they don't know me they think I'm a little angel! Yeah, right! That's what I think. People think that all people in wheelchairs are all goody-goodies. That they don't do anything.*

**Youth worker:**

*So would you like a bit of stereotyping, a bit of negative stuff to actually be thrown your way, to say, you know, that you're treated like everybody else?*

**Daniel:**

*Yeah! That's what I want. I want to be treated like a normal person.*

**Conor:**

*Called a skanger!*

**Daniel:**

*Yeah! [laughter all round].....The more I get treated normally the better...people don't see me as a normal person, they see me as Daniel in a wheelchair, they see me as not going anywhere. That'd just, that'd wreck your head.*

## **Relations with the Gardaí**

In most of the focus groups, the discussion became particularly animated when the young people spoke about the perceptions that appeared to be held of them by members of the Garda Síochána and when they gave an account of their relationships and interactions with this category of adult.

The young people in most groups seemed to have a lot of contact with the Gardaí. In one case – in the scout troop referred to above – this was a very positive experience.

**Helen:**

*Police patrol around my school a lot because it's near the station and the people in my class are pretty friendly with them, they're on first name terms.*

Another group of young people got on well with the Community Garda, who was a leader in their club, but thought other young people didn't.

**Susan:**

*I think we're all grand with [name], he's one of the leaders and people in the club are grand with him, whereas people outside would see him as picking on them because they're this, that and the other.*

One young woman in Cork who had lived in two different parts of the city had different experiences in each.

**Ann:**

*In [area] the Community Garda is lovely, and he comes and he talks to you, and he brings you places and you get to build up a relationship with the Gardaí or whoever in the area, but then when I moved to [area] there wasn't that kind of relationship there. It's just dependent on the people who're working there, in important sectors that affect young people.*

This point – 'it's dependent on the people' – was reinforced by the experiences of a group of young people in Dublin, whose relationship with the previous Community Garda had been very good. He had been moved however and things had deteriorated very badly.

**Steve:**

*I'd say [name] was the only decent one I ever seen.*

**Yvonne:**

*He was really nice. He was deadly, he was. And he was shipped out.*

**Sarah:**

*I mean he'd talk to you like, he'd always say hello and all.*

**Cian:**

*He used to play football and all.*

**Steve:**

*But the rest of them are pigs.*

The young people had very strong opinions about the new Community Garda:

**Sarah:**

*And then [name] came in and the crime levels shot up, because she arrested everybody nearly in the area.*

**Steve:**

*She was only looking for an extra star.*

**Yvonne:**

*She used to knock on everybody's door and start fights between you and your ma, like. She'd say this about you and then, do you know what I mean, she'd come back saying to you 'your ma's saying this about you' and your ma's not even saying anything, like.*

In fact, poor relationships with the Gardaí, and the view that the Gardaí had a poor opinion of young people, dominated several of the focus group discussions (the following are from four different groups).

**Sarah:**

*They get out of the car with an attitude, straight away like. So obviously if they're going to come over with an attitude problem*

*then you're not going to sit there and take it off them. I know you could, say, like, walk away, but it's hard when they're doing it to you, do you know what I mean?*

**Emily:**

*When there's a big group of you you've nowhere to go. You can't all go to a friend's house. We were outside a petrol station and the guard came up and it was like 'Move along' and you're like 'Grand, but where are we going to move along to?' And then they started asking some of the lads to see their IDs for their bikes and stuff like that, and for no reason at all...they put pressure on us.*

**Brian:**

*They just stop and search you when you're with your friends. If a few of us were hanging around they'd just stop and search you, and you'd say what are you searching me for and they'd say drugs.*

**Eamon:**

*People don't make such a big deal out of the guards [when they do wrong]. They look at it as if the youth are well out of order, but the guards...there's probably the same percentage bad guards as there is bad teens.*

The most serious complaints were made in the focus group where the young people had had a good relationship with the previous Community Garda, but a terrible relationship with the current one.

**Michael:**

*They give you some stick, they do.*

**Sam:**

*And when you give it back something bad happens.*

**Facilitator:**

*Like what?*

**Sam:**

*If they don't beat you there on the spot they'll bring you down the station and beat you.*

**Steve:**

*They take your runners off so you don't hang yourself.*

**Facilitator:**

*...Is it all bad with the guards?*

**Many voices:**

*Yeah, yeah...*

**Steve:**

*I'd say that's the biggest problem, 100%.*

Other young people gave examples of 'run-ins' with the Gardaí, or 'not being taken seriously', or treated in a demeaning manner.

**Enda:**

*I remember two or three years ago and a load of us had eggs, and the guards came up and they chased us and they searched us and they got the eggs, and when we walked on they threw the eggs at us. That's just being childish, like, just as childish as we were.*

**Evan:**

*I mean I asked one of them 'have you got the time?', and he says 'yeah' and he just kept walking. He didn't tell me the time...And I mean I'm going to tell that to my mates, it's more interesting to tell, more interesting than the guard who gave me the time.*

In the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) youth group some of the young people had recently been verbally abused and physically threatened by other young people on Grafton Street, Dublin. A few Gardaí were nearby at the time.

**Alan:**

*One of the guards that was walking by, and the face on him, he was in his 30s and even*

*he was like, he sort of laughed, so even some people who are (a) adults and (b) people who are supposed to protect us no matter what, even he was having a bit of a laugh.*

A word that was commonly used in the accounts of experiences such as these was 'respect'. It was also an issue in the young people's experiences of using shopping centres and interacting with security guards.

## Going Shopping

The difficulties associated with going to shopping centres and other commercial venues, and being treated differently because of being young, were a very common experience for the young people and a topic of lively discussion. The common perception was that staff – security guards in particular, but also other personnel – automatically regarded a group of young people as suspect. During the period when the focus groups were being held, a television advertisement was being broadcast regularly which played on the irony of two shopkeepers watching every move made by a young man who has come into their shop, while an older woman helps herself to the contents of the till; and this came up in the discussion.

**Mona:**

*It's so true, like it's realistic, you know, like you walk into a shop with your friends and the security guard is there looking at you and following you around, and some old lady could be over at the other side of the shop shoplifting, like you know.*

**Don:**

*Bring your granny if you want to rob the shop!*

**Conor:**

*Me and my sister were shopping in [name of shop] and we went in and there were like four of us, me, him [his friend sitting beside him], and then my sister and her friend and the minute we went in I swear to God we were watched like hawks. I think she was the head security that was watching us, and then she had, like, all the minions running after us. We were actually genuinely shopping. We had the trolley, and we were going around collecting stuff, we were hardly going to fill a trolley with stuff and then walk out without paying, you know what I mean? I actually approached her and said 'Listen will you stop following us' and she basically said 'It's my job and I'm allowed to follow you...if you're not happy then don't shop here.' Like there was a trolley full of stuff, a lot of money in the trolley...I just left, I just walked off.*

**Emily:**

*A few weeks ago I went into [name of shop] near where I live, and there was a group of us, three guys and two girls, and my friend's brother works there, and he told us that the second we came in there was a thing, like he heard the thing [radio] going to the security guard 'watch them', like. And we didn't notice, we were totally oblivious to the fact that we were being watched because we were teenagers. We were insulted when we heard. Why were we being watched?*

One young woman and her friend had a similar experience even though they were going into the shop looking for work.

**Trish:**

*She was giving in her CV like, for a job, and the minute we walked in the security guard was following us everywhere, and only for like she was talking to a girl [on the staff]...and they still followed us, until we went upstairs [to the office].*

The young people insisted that they didn't see adults being treated like this.

**Tim:**

*If there's a load of adults standing around, they'll say nothing. Like you know the balcony up at the top [of the shopping centre], if we were standing there they'd tell us to move, but if there was a load of adults they'd just leave them there.*

**Conor:**

*If there was four adults walking around they wouldn't be watching them. Like they don't watch...let's say if John [the youth worker] or any of the old ones here walked in [raucous laughter]...they wouldn't watch you, know what I mean?*



**Eamon:**

*It's over the top. They just follow around teenagers. Just because of the way we look or because of what they think of the way we look.*

In fact, the 'way they looked' regularly came up in the young people's discussions about how they thought they were seen by adults, in shopping centres and elsewhere. There was a lot of talk in particular about 'hoodies'.

**Declan:**

*If you're walking into the shopping centre they'll stop you and say take the hood down.*

**Martin:**

*That's so they know, they'll see you on the camera if you're robbing something.*

**Declan:**

*The guards will tell you to put your hood down. No point in putting a hood on something if you're not allowed to wear it.*

**Donal:**

*They wouldn't be in the shops if they weren't there to wear.*

Again, the young people compared their own situation to that of other age-groups.

**Niamh:**

*I don't think it's very fair to say if you're wearing a hoodie you're intimidating. I mean you'd get laughed at if you told an adult what to wear...like I mean, 'you can't wear a tie'!*

**Deirdre:**

*Or cords!*

There was a similar exchange in another focus group.

**Karen:**

*I can see that people might feel intimidated by it, but that's as silly as saying that you're intimidated by old women walking around in scarves or something.*

**Adrian:**

*Do you not have a right to wear what clothes you want? There must be certain rights. You can't just be told what to wear and what not to wear...It's an abuse of power, the security guards, they abuse their power by stopping everybody.*

Age and clothes were not the only consideration when it came to being seen and treated differently.

**Mark:**

*My girlfriend is Nigerian...and when we go shopping in town, people will look at you and follow you around. In some shops now, they'll come over to you I don't know how many times and ask you do you want help or something and like, they don't do it to...I've watched it. You go into a shop and they'll come over to us and ask do you want help a million times but they won't go to other people in the shop who are just looking or going to try on clothes or whatever.*

The experience of being watched and followed around shops was also a common one for the young Travellers, while (for those old enough) there was the added problem of regularly being turned away from pubs and clubs.

**Teresa:**

*When we want to go out at the weekend there's nowhere to go because we're not allowed into pubs and night clubs. They say you have to show your ID, so you're not let in that week, so you go the following week and they say 'No, you're not a regular'. But how can you become a regular when you're not allowed in?*

For these young people, anti-Traveller prejudice can be compounded by negative views of young people in general. Some of them had recently been refused entry to the cinema.

**John:**

*She wanted us out [the woman at the door].*

**Patrick:**

*But we wouldn't get out.*

**Facilitator:**

*And can I ask you if she wouldn't let you in because you were young men or because you were young Travellers?*

**John:**

*Young Travellers.*

**Patrick:**

*Both. We were Travellers.*

**John:**

*Young Travellers. Young Travellers.*

In the LGBT group, the most recent experience of being badly treated while out and about (referred to already) was at the hands of other young people a few days before on Dublin's Grafton Street, when a group of them had received verbal abuse – and one had been threatened with a bottle – because of their sexual orientation. For the youth worker in this group it was a familiar occurrence.

**Brendan:**

*It's happening quite often to young people from here. I think that [other] young people are finding it strange to have groups of openly gay young people walking down the street. It's something they're not used to, they've never seen it before...They seem threatened by it.*

## Politicians

With very few exceptions the focus group participants' experiences and opinions of politicians, and their perception of politician's attitudes toward young people, were negative. One focus group took place in a constituency which had elected one of the youngest TDs in Dáil Éireann, who seemed popular with the young people ('He's lovely!'). In another area, one young person told how she had talked to the leader of one of the smaller political parties and 'he actually listened to my views and something was actually done about it'. Elsewhere a participant suggested that one particular party had a 'great support for young people' but that the others didn't.

There was a strong sense that for the most part politicians were much older than themselves ('sure the average age is over 50'; 'like, they're in their 40s and 50s and there's no bridge between the generations') and the predominant view was that they dismissed young people as unimportant.

**Brian:**

*See, politicians don't really care about young people because they can't vote. They're only interested in adults.*

**Emma:**

*Sure the last time the elections were on the [party name] candidate knocked on the door and I opened the door. All he said was 'Is your mam there?' He didn't want to talk to me at all, and I had just got the vote like. And that's why...like they say young people don't vote and all, and they won't talk to us like.*

**Ann:**

*Young people are seen as second class citizens. We don't have, like you have to be 18 to have the right to vote and although*

*Dáil na nÓg is doing great work, and the NYCI (National Youth Council of Ireland), realistically young people don't have a voice.*

This 'voicelessness' was linked to the fact that young people can be easily stereotyped or 'categorised'.

**Helen:**

*I think it's kind of easier to categorise children because we have less of a voice in the government and various places because we don't get to vote or anything, so if we are categorised there isn't that many people to actually stand up for us where it counts, so I think that's part of the problem as well.*

**Elaine:**

*Because if people do categorise us we're not going to do anything about it...*

**Facilitator 1:**

*There's nobody to go to...*

**Facilitator 2:**

*To say that's not fair?*

**Elaine:**

*Yeah.*

**Facilitator 2:**

*What about going to politicians?*

**Helen:**

*I've talked to a lot of politicians in my area and most of them just smile indulgently and, you know, 'here's a free sticker'.  
[Laughter all round]*

**Niamh:**

*Yeah, vote for me when you grow up.*

One of the focus groups included several young people who had travelled to Dublin for a conference on youth issues.

**Ann:**

*...and the Taoiseach was there for ten or fifteen minutes, and he left, he made sweeping statements that we couldn't rebut because he wasn't there to answer our questions, so it was pointless.*

To compound the young people's frustration, one of them was 'coached' by a camera man on how to smile and look interested when posing for a photograph with the Taoiseach.

**Ann:**

*I just think it's ironic, the fact that she had to pretend to talk to him when she couldn't actually talk to him and make him aware of the issues they were there to discuss.*

Sometimes the young people drew an explicit parallel between media stereotypes and how politicians saw young people. There was a view that politicians themselves, in the ways they sometimes talked about young people and the issues they highlighted, were both responding to media stereotyping and helping to fuel it.

**Susan:**

*I mean that anti-social thing. I don't think they're really listening to us or doing anything for us. Like we can't vote for them, so why should they cater for us? I mean I suppose they kind of have to with children, with hospitals and stuff like that, but teenagers get left out a lot. And of course the media portrays us as really bad people.*

Other stereotypes of young people, particularly relevant to the political domain, came up in the discussion.

**Helen:**

*There's a stereotype that we're not as intelligent as older people and therefore our views aren't acceptable.*

**Emily:**

*The stereotype as well is that kids don't care, it's a stereotype that they don't care and they don't want to be involved and all this, but it's that they're not given a choice. Like some kids don't care, but some adults don't care either, it's the same.*

This view was echoed in another group, and related to the question of voting.

**Declan:**

*How do they know we don't care?*

**Gary:**

*We don't get to say what we want, so how would they know we don't?*

**Facilitator:**

*And do you care?*

**Gary:**

*About some things. There'd be some things you wouldn't vote on but that's the same as adults, they wouldn't vote on some things.*

Some of the young people took the view that 18 was a reasonable age at which to be entitled to vote, but most thought it should be younger.

**Angela:**

*I think it's right, because you wouldn't expect a 13 year-old to be able to vote...because when you're 18 the majority of people have matured so I think 18 is right.*

**Helen:**

*Maturity doesn't just come with age, it comes with experience and other things...I have yet to actually find a good reason why someone of 30 can vote but someone under 18 can't. I know there's the maturity issue, but some people...I mean, I think there was one [election] when there was a near majority vote for Dustin the turkey. It just doesn't make sense.*

Some of the young people had clear opinions on why there might be resistance to a change in the voting age.

**Emily:**

*Some older people judge the election on the history and the past, but when young people look into it they're seeing it from the present day into the future, they're not looking at the past.*

**Emma:**

*I think they make 18 the age to vote because possibly young people would want something else...at the moment people are still voting the same people in. If they let us vote things would have to change, and they don't want that.*

## **Teachers and School**

The young people frequently spoke at length about their experience of school and their relationships with teachers. They gave many examples of caring and supportive behaviour.

**Enda:**

*I think some of them actually care about young people, they're aware of what's going on outside school.*

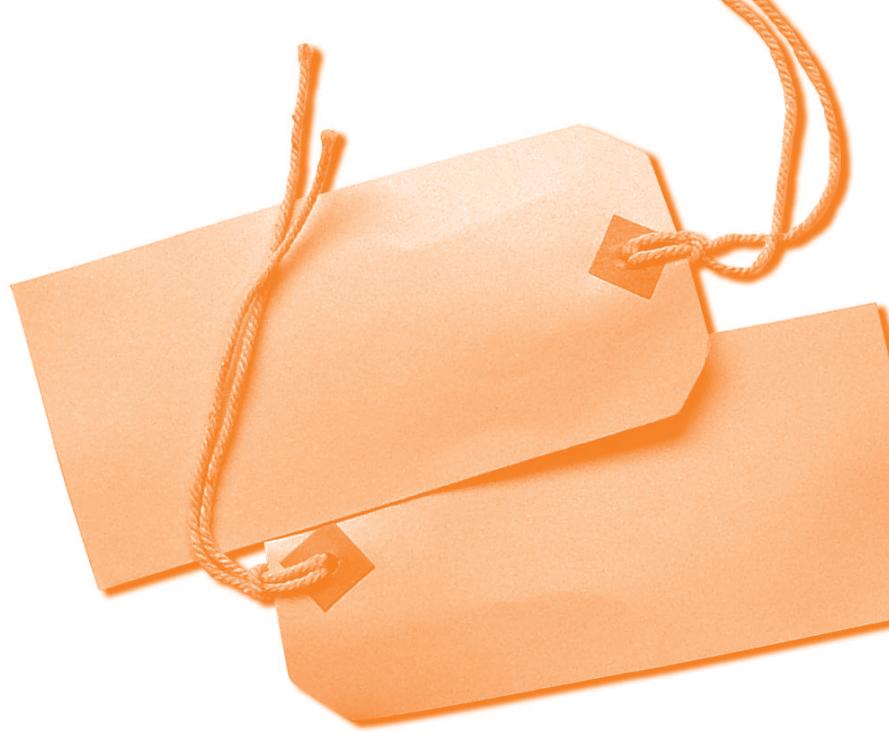
**Emily:**

*And they always ask if you're having any difficulty with your family.*

**Enda:**

*And if you're depressed or anything they'll ask are you alright, are there troubles at home?*

However, their experience of teachers was decidedly mixed, with pronounced differences of personality and teaching style.



**Helen:**

*Some teachers are more understanding and more about the individual whereas other teachers kind of just think I'm the teacher, do as I say and I don't have to give you a reason, you know, this is how it's going to be. But they don't seem to recognise that they can be wrong.*

**Angela:**

*Some teachers actually want to help us on by teaching the children but others just want to get the work and the curriculum finished.*

**Brian:**

*Some of them, if you were in trouble they'd help you, they'd be calm and all that, but there's others would be just roaring and shouting at you, they won't give you a chance to say what you want.*

As was the case when they spoke about other groups of adults, the issue of 'lack of respect' was often mentioned.

**Eamon:**

*Some teachers think we'll beat them and shout at them, that's how we'll get respect. They probably gave people respect back then*

*[when they were young], teachers probably got respect but not any more it's moved on. If someone does that to us it's just the opposite...You gain respect by actually talking to the person instead of just shouting at them.*

**Carmel:**

*All they've got to do is treat us like human beings, treat us like they'd treat their colleagues. Like you see them on the corridor and they're laughing and joking and then they come into class and slam the books down on the table. What's changed? It's their job, they chose that job, we can't change it for them.*

**Donal:**

*It's the same everywhere, you get some that are bad and you get other people that are just cranky with a lot of grey hair.*

**Joan:**

*On the other hand, teachers have problems as well and there's times when they really show that they're human and they probably feel exactly what we feel.*

The main concern for the young people was not that individual teachers were

disrespectful or unpleasant on occasion but that they had very little say in decision-making and in how schools were run – the issue, touched on above, of ‘not having a voice’. A small number of the young people did seem to be happy with the mechanisms for participation.

**Angela:**

*In my school anyway there’s a forum and there’s a forum rep in each class and they go along and they ask, first of all they ask the class is there anything that they want to put on the list and they discuss it.*

In several of the focus groups, however, the young people seemed to be unanimously of the view that they had no say whatsoever in decision-making. Even where systems such as school councils were in place, their effectiveness could be limited, or they appeared not to be taken very seriously by staff; or they might actually be subject to a form of vetting.

**Helen:**

*In our school we have a school council. There’s two people from each class and they have a meeting with the principal, not a very formal meeting, just about fundraising for the school and stuff, and then they come back [to the class] and say what they talked about, and you suggest things that they can talk about next week and it’s written in a notebook. But they’re never looked at by the Principal and, some of the teachers are strict, and if they don’t think that an idea is worthy of going to the Principal they won’t let you say it even though a lot of people think it should go. So they say ‘Oh don’t write that down, that’s something you should discuss with me’, and they don’t let you say stuff.*

Many of the young people said that there were too many rules, a lot of which were relatively trivial; and that in general rules should be negotiated.

**Niamh:**

*[The rules are in a handbook] but nobody ever reads them because it’s really small writing and there’s like 20 pages of them. If they made fewer rules and put them in bigger writing people would actually read them. But there’s just loads and loads of little ones.*

**Helen:**

*I think the way schools should be run is it should work between the pupils and the teachers, where the rules would be worked out between the two so it benefits everyone...I really think there should be more pupil representatives in how the school works and runs because...I know that the staff is running it but the pupils are the ones that it’s actually there for, so we should definitely have a bigger say in how things are run.*

Some of the rules about behaviour in school, and other arrangements associated with going to school, were regarded as simply unfair, representing a type of treatment that didn’t, or wouldn’t, apply to adults.

**Elaine:**

*Some rules, like you’re not allowed to go to the bathroom during a lesson and stuff, some of those sorts of rules are just unfair, especially in secondary school where some teachers don’t let you out during the class so if you have a double class and they won’t let you out that’s an hour and 20 minutes, and you don’t have that much time between classes to go to the bathroom and everybody’s queuing.*

**Donna:**

*The 3 for 2 seats on buses...it’s teenagers and children, 14, 15 and 16 year-olds, I think that is really, really bad. I think it’s very unequal. That wouldn’t happen with an ordinary bus from Dublin to Ratoath.*

**Niamh:**

*Our teacher like rings people and texts people in the middle of class, and yet our phone is confiscated for a week if its seen, even if its off.*

For the young people with disabilities there were particular concerns. One young man put it succinctly.

**Ivan:**

*The whole education sector pisses me off. It's full of stereotyping.*

Several of these young people told of negative attitudes and experiences of education, even within organisations which dealt specifically with young people with disabilities. Very often, their impression was that they were regarded as having no significant ability or potential.

**Conor:**

*I was the same in [name of organisation]. I was left sitting around, on my own.*

**Facilitator 1:**

*Just left to your own devices?*

**Conor:**

*Yeah.*

**Facilitator 2:**

*So they didn't think you were worth teaching?*

**Daniel:**

*Obviously not.*

A young woman with cerebral palsy had a similar experience, but was determined to prove herself.

**Maria:**

*They told me I was stupid and I wouldn't be able to do my exam, and I did it and passed it. I was able to do it on a computer, all by myself.*

Other grievances for this group of young people included what they saw as inadequate additional support and facilities for people with disabilities at second-level, as compared with third-level; and having a more restricted subject choice than other young people.

**Bronagh:**

*Why do most disabled schools not teach their pupils Irish?*

**Conor:**

*Yeah, Irish and religion. The two most hated subjects!*

**Bronagh:**

*They may be horrible but why are we not given a choice?*

**Barry:**

*It would give you more options. You might be great at Irish.*

**Others:**

*Yeah! [general agreement]*

**Bronagh:**

*It's our native language. We have a right to learn it, like every other Irish citizen.*

In the LGBT youth group, being seen and treated differently at school because of their sexual orientation was commonplace for the young people, although some of them had very positive experiences of support from teachers ('The religion teacher talked about the gay community in a positive way'; 'I think most of the teachers wouldn't have a problem with it') and from other students. Their peers were more likely to be supportive and understanding on an individual basis than when they were in groups.

**Mario:**

*They are just not used to it. It's something new and I think people are sometimes just scared of new things, they don't know how to handle it, they just don't know how to react. And because of the peer pressure, in school to be different is the worst thing you can do, so they just say gay is bad, because their friends expect it. It's always like that in the group. I think it's different when you talk to somebody in private.*

Experiences included not being able to bring a partner of the same sex to the 'debs'.

**Alan:**

*[My friend] was told that he wouldn't be able to go to the debs if he brought a 'male friend' as the teacher put it. He was told they didn't want an uprising, there would be too many parents against it.*

The same student had found that attitudes and practices were very different in the two second-level schools he had attended.

*I started 5th year in [school name] and the school knew at this stage [I was gay] and I went into the English class and I sat down and no-one would sit beside me. And somebody came in late and [the teacher] made him sit beside me, and the day after that guy came into the class with a note from his father saying that he wasn't to be put sitting beside me.*

When he changed schools the situation was very different, and he put this down to the school management and ethos.

*...it's a totally different attitude between the two schools, between [school name] and a non-denominational school. The [non-denominational school] has included sexual orientation in its bullying policy.*

Another young man in this group had attempted suicide after being bullied both by teachers and students: 'I said who cares. No one liked me in the class. I had a rough year.' He too changed schools and things were better. Members of the group noted that while there was a lot of talk about the high rate of suicide among young people in Ireland, particularly young men, insufficient attention was paid to the fact that homophobia and anti-gay prejudice and discrimination were almost certainly contributory factors in some cases.

These young people all agreed that the attitude and behaviour of individual teachers were crucial in setting the tone for how young LGBT people might be regarded and treated by other students, and that more widespread recognition of sexual orientation as an issue in relevant school policies and procedures would be a very positive step.

## **Relationships and Respect**

Overall, the message emerging from the focus groups is that, while there are certainly exceptions, the young people see their institutional relationships with adults as for the most part unequal, troubled and rooted in stereotypical ideas about their attributes and abilities. The negative aspects of these relationships were particularly thrown into relief when the young people described their relationships with youth workers.

**Angela:**

*They're different. They don't treat us like we're beneath them.*

**Joe:**

*They treat us on a level [making gesture with hands].*

Some of the young people also commented on what their lives would be like if they weren't involved in youth work.

**Donal:**

*You come here to get away from all that [hassle].*

**Brian:**

*They're taking us off the street, out of trouble.*

**Gary:**

*Otherwise we'd be out getting in trouble, whereas we're in here and that's keeping us out of trouble. But we need more [places to go and things to do].*

**Facilitator:**

*Why do you think youth workers are different from some of the other adults you come across?*

**Michael:**

*They show us respect.*

**Brian:**

*We go and talk to them. We don't talk to all the people on the street. They don't know what we think. They don't give us a chance. [The youth workers] set up this to give us a chance.*

The focus groups participants broadly seemed to share the view that while adults in general stereotype young people (and treat them differently on the basis of the stereotypes), some young people experience additional difficulties by virtue of their identities, or backgrounds (e.g. being a young Traveller or LGBT young person, having a disability, living in a particular neighbourhood).

**Enda:**

*Young people in general are discriminated against and then there are certain sections within young people as an umbrella group that get even more discriminated against, and its just making people aware of it, aware that they're doing it.*

The prevalence of particular stereotypes, and their impact on those being stereotyped, are relative and vary with context and circumstances. In the group which included several young asylum-seekers for instance, there was little evidence that they thought they were regarded negatively because they were young people, whereas being seen – and treated – differently for other reasons did surface: one young Moldovan woman told of being very upset when her mother was shouted at by a bus driver for not speaking English.

A further suggestion in the focus groups was that some stereotypes are so pervasive that young people themselves 'buy into' them; that they sometimes stereotype young people in different social groups from themselves; and that in the particular case of young people with certain disabilities, one aspect of the social exclusion they face is in fact *not* being seen as being like other young people.

In any case, whether the stereotype has to do with the nature of young people or of some other group (e.g. people with disabilities), several participants suggested that such thinking was common because it was often 'easier' to think in simplistic terms.

**Niamh:**

*Sometimes it's just easier to...rather than say 'oh well they're good sometimes but they can be bad now and again', it's easier just to see it one way.*

**Daniel:**

*It's because people are too lazy to get to know the person. They see a person, wheelchair, disabled person, 'Ah God help her'. And in order to get to know that person you'd have to go up and talk to them, and that involves effort.*

As regards the stereotyping of young people, however, it was suggested that adults should know better because they have probably experienced this themselves.

**Gavin:**

*Adults were once teenagers, so they already were stereotyped, so from their past experience could they not just realise and have a more open mind?*

Some participants thought that, judging from their own experiences, training for those who work with teenagers could be improved. In one of the Dublin groups the young people suggested that training for Gardaí didn't seem practical enough and that it didn't prepare many Gardaí for the difference between their own background and the neighbourhoods they found themselves working in.

**Steve:**

*They have all the training but they don't have any experience in how to handle you hands on like, do you know what I mean?*

**Angela:**

*And they're all given the extremes of what'd happen, and that's what they go out and expect.*

**Jane:**

*...And they don't know like, what it's like here.*

A similar point was made in another group.

**Alan:**

*Some kind of course [is needed] for teachers and all, on how to deal with teenagers, because [they seem to know] how to deal with kids, but there's nothing really out there on how to deal with teenagers...and how we like to be treated.*

Again in this context, the issue of respect was raised.

**Alan:**

*They say the kids have no respect. It's because they're not showing us respect. Why should we show it back? They're all...'teenagers this and teenagers that' and then they expect to get respect from us after criticising us so much. If you don't show respect you won't get it back.*

One focus group concluded with a discussion of the need for compromise.

**Claire:**

*We'd have to change as well, we can't leave it all up to them. They're worse than us, but we'd have to change as well. Now, we have no time for people...for adults, like, that don't give a shite about us, whereas [if they changed] we'd have to change as well.....*

**Jean:**

*Meet them half way.*

## Conclusion

This chapter has presented findings from ten focus group discussions with young people, which explored their perceptions of how they were thought of and treated by adults, and of relationships between young people and adults generally. The discussions covered a range of sectors of society and categories of adult: the media, the local community, the Gardaí, shopping centres and security guards, politicians, and teachers and school. Overall, the picture which emerges is of young people perceiving themselves as being seen in a very negative light by adults, and perceiving their treatment at the hands of adults as being unequal and unfair. There were certainly some differences of opinion or of emphasis, based on the composition of the focus groups, the areas the young people lived in or the particular group of adults they were discussing at any one time, but the overall thrust of the discussions was strikingly negative.

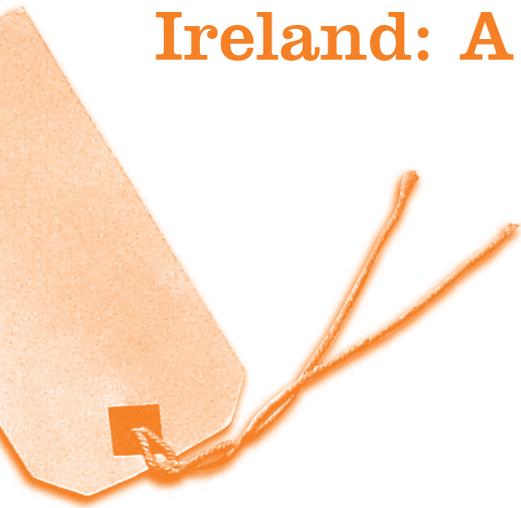
In short, while the young people themselves did not always (or even often) use the term, most of their negative experiences of relationships with adults seem to have involved an element of stereotyping, which has been defined in this report as the use of a 'relatively rigid and oversimplified conception of a group of people, in which all individuals in the given group are labelled with the so-called group characteristics' (Wrightsmann and Deaux 1981: 72). While stereotypes themselves are essentially ideas, we have already seen that these ideas are frequently reflected in, and reinforced by, discriminatory practices, and this is also borne out by the accounts given by the young people here, who consistently spoke of being treated

in a way adults wouldn't be treated: in the education system, in shops and public places, by the Gardaí, by politicians and by adults in their own communities. Given the discriminatory nature of such practices it is important to enquire whether the stereotypical ideas and images on which they might be based are actually commonly held in our society, or whether the young people's perceptions are misguided. The following two chapters present some empirical evidence to help answer this question.



# Chapter 4

## Stereotyping of Young People in Ireland: A Case Study of the Press



Previous chapters of this report have provided a theoretical and conceptual framework for understanding the nature and impact of stereotyping and have given an account of how young people themselves think they are perceived by adults (confirming that for the most part they think they are seen in stereotypical ways). This chapter will present some empirical data about the ways in which young people are stereotyped in Ireland. It draws on a detailed study of the representation of young people in the Irish media, conducted by the present writer as part of his doctoral research.

First, the chapter gives examples of how the media, as well as generating ideas and images independently, can often act as a channel for the dissemination of ideas (including stereotypical ideas) which have originated elsewhere. This very act of communicating them in such a public and prominent way can help to reinforce them, and to perpetuate what has been called a 'loop of disinformation' about social issues or social groups (Graef 2004: 13). The chapter then

presents the findings of a content analysis of news items featuring young people, showing how a small number of thematic categories account for the vast majority of stories, and how this pattern is distinctly gendered. In keeping with the emphasis in Chapter 2 on the importance of language itself in the process of stereotyping, examples are given of the ways in which different words and terms are used in the newspapers when young people are being portrayed, and of how, again, gender is a very important factor. It is suggested that despite many differences between the newspapers (tabloid and broadsheet) certain types of stereotypical representation of young people are common to all.

### 'Mediating' Stereotypes

Wherever stereotyping happens, the mass media (of one kind or another) are usually central in disseminating and reinforcing the stereotypical ideas and images. This can be seen if we look at examples of professional and academic stereotyping of young people.

Stereotyping can of course originate in any sector of society or walk of life: an individual may, for instance, have a negative experience of another individual and on that basis jump to conclusions about a whole social group, in other words engage in stereotyping. However, as suggested in Chapter 2, for stereotyping to have a potent impact, particularly a negative impact, on an entire group, it is usually necessary that it is legitimised by influential groups and institutions.

Academics are one such group. Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist already referred to several times in this report, went so far as to argue that ‘the production of representations of the social world, which is a fundamental dimension of political struggles, is the virtual monopoly of intellectuals’ (1993: 37). While this is probably an overstatement, it is certainly the case that academics and academic institutions can have a very strong influence on public discourse, on how others see the world (which is not to say that their views go uncontested). As Kathleen Lynch has put it in the Irish context:

Academics create virtual realities, textual realities, ethnographic and statistical realities. These overhang and frame the lived existence of those who cannot name their own world; it is frequently in the context of these detached and remoter realities that public policy is enacted. The frame becomes the picture in the public eye. (Lynch 1999: 52)

However, in order for the ‘frame to become the picture in the public eye’ a process of *mediation* has to take place, since academics and other intellectuals, and policy-makers, do not as a rule interact directly with the vast majority of

the ‘public’. This is, literally, where the media play a vital role. On the one hand, *media* professionals are themselves influenced by academic discourses of one kind or another (having in most cases had some form of academic training). On the other, the media regularly give a privileged place to academic expertise, inviting academics and other professionals to offer specialised commentary or advice.

One example relevant to young people will suffice here. A few years ago an advice column for parents by a clinical psychologist in a serious broadsheet newspaper carried the heading ‘Adolescence: the “mental illness” with a high price’, and included the words:

It most often happens with the first child. He reaches 12 or 13 years of age and parents are asking themselves ‘What happened to the lovely, bubbly, good-humoured delight we had living with us six months ago? The only response to any questions we ask now is a grunt.’ Many parents are convinced that there is something wrong with the child. But you can rest assured that the diagnosis in most cases is one word: *adolescence...*

One of the greatest ironies about the phenomenon called adolescence is the tremendous efforts teenagers make to be different. And yet, as a group, they are the most identifiable and homogeneous subsection of the population one could observe. They all wear the same fashion items no matter how hideous... [T]eenagers stick out a mile in any crowd – not because they are so ‘different’, but because they are all the same. (Harrold 1997: 5)

The thinking about young people in this advice column is clearly stereotypical, but it is presented as carrying considerable academic and professional authority. As will be seen below, it is very much in keeping with the media's own representations of young people.

A further example shows how, when it comes to stereotyping, the media act in concert with other interests, in this case political parties. Some years ago, a Dublin branch of a major political party took the view that juvenile crime was an issue of major concern to the public – what the politicians were ‘hearing about on the doorsteps’. It decided to conduct a survey in its local area on this topic, and circulated all households with a copy of a self-completion questionnaire. Respondents – members of the community – were asked to give a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer to a range of questions on young people, crime and the juvenile justice system. There was no option on the questionnaire to answer ‘don’t know’ or ‘not sure’; and in some cases the questions were obviously ‘leading’, for example:

Do you agree that most of the crime affecting people appears to be caused by young males between 12 and 20?  
Yes\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_

The political party collected the completed questionnaires and analysed them, and circulated a leaflet summarising the findings, both in the local community and to the media. The result was that the leading item on the front page of the evening newspaper was about ‘uncontrolled juveniles’. The very publication of the news report helped to give an added sense of urgency to ‘youth crime’ as a political issue and a source of public concern; and could well have

made it more likely that politicians would indeed be hearing about it ‘on the doorsteps’. They in turn could then make more of an issue of it in their media appearances. This is an example, and a relatively minor one, of the cyclical dynamic – the ‘loop of disinformation’ – that sustains and reproduces much stereotyping in the media, in politics and in the community at large, in this case reinforcing the view that young people are more deviant and delinquent than other age groups.

### **Young People: a ‘Pressing’ Concern**

Like other news media, the press play a central role in the operation of complex modern societies. In fact, Roger Fowler (1991: 29) has described newspapers as ‘society’s major mode of representation of its important and habitual processes’. It is important to consider therefore whether there is anything patterned, or ‘habitual’, about the way the press represent young people.

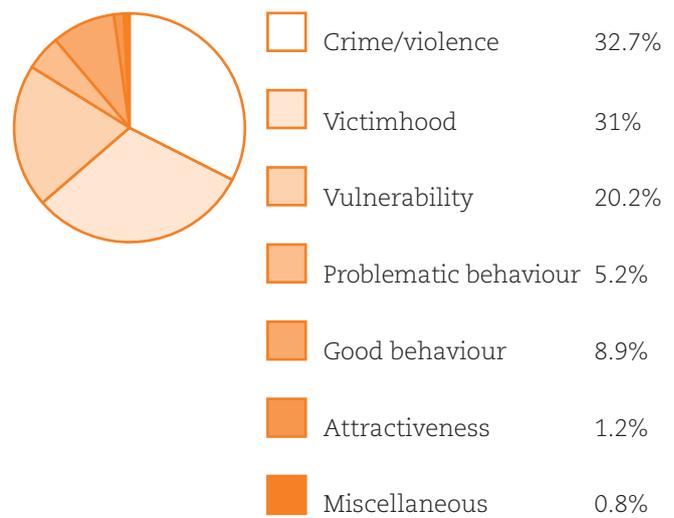
There has to date been only one large-scale study of media representations of young people in Ireland. This study included as one of its strands the monitoring of the Irish-published morning newspapers (i.e. not including titles which might be printed or distributed but not published here) for three separate months over one calendar year: March, July and November (Devlin 2000). At the time of the research there were four such newspapers: *The Daily Star*, *The Examiner*, *The Irish Independent* and *The Irish Times* (in two cases the names have since changed). Stories were initially sampled on the basis that the headline included any one (or more) of a list of key

words or terms (the list was devised through a pilot study). These included: 'youth' (as noun or adjective), 'young person', 'young people', 'youngster', 'adolescent', 'juvenile', 'minor', 'teenager', and so on; as well as the plurals, abbreviations and other forms of these words, e.g. 'teen'. *Simply looking at this list confirms that – in terms of the concepts introduced earlier in this report – young people in our society are indeed 'overlexicalised'!* The words 'boy(s)' and 'girl(s)' were also included in the checklist so as to facilitate analysis of differential use of these terms. The result of this process was a sample of 608 news items.

While the total sample was subjected to a variety of analytical procedures, most relevant in the present context is the analysis conducted on a *sub-sample* of the total, consisting of only those stories where the ages of the young people were explicitly given and were between 12 and 21 inclusive (the main reason for this exercise was that some of the other stories, particularly those with the word 'boy' or 'girl' in the headline, were not actually about young people). This sub-sample included 248 stories. These were subjected to a detailed thematic analysis, resulting in the identification of 32 specific categories of story (young people as the perpetrators of specific types of criminal or problematic behaviour, or as victims of the same behaviour; specific types of good behaviour, such as educational, sporting or musical success, and so on).

Analysed further, it was possible to group these very specific categories into broader themes, as shown in **Figure 1** and listed opposite (with the proportion in each case).

**Figure 1.**  
**Themes of news stories about young people.**



**Criminal and violent behaviour (general 'deviance') – 32.7%**

Including murder, manslaughter, physical assault, sexual assault, theft, vandalism and other crime, with the young person(s) as perpetrator(s).

**Victimhood – 31%**

Victim of physical assault (including death), of sexual assault, of accidental death or suicide.

**Vulnerability – 20.2%**

Due to health problems, inadequate services, lack of care or support, unemployment or homelessness.

**'Problematic behaviour' – 5.2%**

Behaviour which is not necessarily criminal but which is difficult or problematic, involving e.g. alcohol, drugs, sexuality.

### **‘Good behaviour’ – 8.9%**

Including sporting, artistic or musical success, educational achievement, community service, political commitment, environmental awareness.

### **Attractiveness – 1.2%**

Focusing on the style, attractiveness or desirability of young people.

### **Miscellaneous – 0.8%**

General stories about demographics or about youth as a category with none of the above ‘angles’.

The pattern represented in these figures is broadly in line with the findings from other countries (see the following chapter), in that the dominant categories are those portraying young people in roles of deviant/criminal and victim (each accounting for almost one third of stories), or as being vulnerable in some way (more than one in five). Together, these themes account for *almost 85% of all stories*. In short, Irish news stories tend in the vast majority of cases to portray young people either as *being a problem or as having problems*.

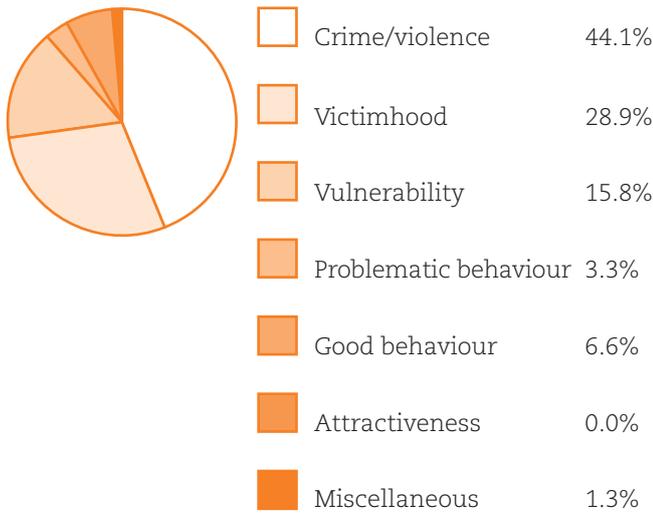
This is precisely in keeping with the findings of British sociologist Christine Griffin, who argues that this type of discourse can be found not just in the media but in academic and political life, and that it has an important gender and ‘racial’/ethnic dimension:

One of the key features of academic (and non-academic) representations of youth is the widespread construction of youth in general, and specific groups of young people in particular, as ‘problems’. This problem status may involve being seen as the *source* of a

particular focus of adult concern (such as football hooliganism), or as being ‘at risk’ of getting into difficulty of some kind (such as ‘teenage pregnancy’). Young people are frequently presented as either actively ‘deviant’ or passively ‘at risk’, and sometimes as both simultaneously. In general, young men are more likely to be presented as actively ‘deviant’, especially in aggressive forms, and especially if they are working class and/or black. Young women, however, are more likely to be constructed as passively ‘at risk’.  
(Griffin, 1997: 17-18)

Bearing out this point about the differences in the portrayal of young men and women, the overall Irish data summarised above and in Figure 1 do in fact mask significant gender differences. Firstly, it is important to note that 152 of these 248 stories (more than 60%) feature males only. Secondly, within each gender category there are important differences (Figures 2 and 3). A very substantial proportion of stories about young men – at 44%, not far off half – are ones which focus on criminality/deviance; with 29% being about victimhood and just 16% about vulnerability. For young women the picture is different: victimhood is the focus of more than one third of stories (36%), vulnerability accounts for a quarter (26%) and crime/deviance only 15%. Within each theme the difference can be particularly striking: more than 80% of stories about crime/deviance feature young men, while every one of the (few) stories with attractiveness as their theme are about young women. As already suggested above, this seems a rather narrowly stereotyped media representation of the differences between the sexes.

**Figure 2.**  
Themes of news stories about young men.



## Language: What's in a Name?

Research in other countries – as will be seen in the following chapter – suggests that there is a significant pattern in the way the media select from the many lexical options available for referring to young people. This applies in public life more broadly, and has been commented on by the British writers Jeffs and Smith:

[Y]outh has acquired a predominantly masculine connotation... terms like 'youths loitering', 'youth crime', 'marginalised youth' and 'disaffected youth' summon up images of groups of young males on street corners or behaving in some unacceptable way. Teenage, by contrast, has a more 'feminine' set of associations. We discuss 'teenage pregnancy' never youth pregnancy. Also, when topics such as 'teenage magazines', 'teen pop' or 'teen fashion' arise we can be fairly certain the emphasis will be on products directed at both a specific age group and young women in particular... Lastly, 'young person' tends to be used as a way of denoting status (e.g. 'Young Person's Railcard'). (Jeffs and Smith 1998: 50-51)

**Figure 3.**  
Themes of news stories about young women.



This pattern is confirmed in the Irish context. In the newspaper sample under discussion, as appears to be the case in everyday conversation, the word 'youth' (as a noun referring to an individual) is only ever applied to males. In this sample of news headlines, the individual noun 'youth' is not only used exclusively of males but in 9 out of 10 cases it is also used specifically with reference to a criminal and/or violent event. In just over half the stories the young man is the (alleged) perpetrator of the crime, and when this is the case the word is used in what is (syntactically) a strikingly

formulaic way: 'youth' followed by a past participle ('arrested', 'charged') or, less frequently, an adjective or adjectival clause ('guilty', 'to be sentenced'):

- Youth held in murder of woman
- Sex youth remanded
- Youth on the run

In the case of 'teenager', and related words like 'teen', Jeffs and Smith's suggestion of predominantly feminine and consumer-related connotations is in many cases borne out:

- Glossy teen mags proclaim an end to innocence
- Sex-saturated media playing big role in teen pregnancies
- Births to teenagers fall

However, 'teenager' is, proportionately, applied roughly equally to males and females (there are more occurrences in the sample of male 'teenagers' but that is because there are more references to males overall). The difference is that where it is applied to females it appears to be almost always used to suggest victimhood or vulnerability (whereas in the case of males a 'teenager' is equally likely to be a perpetrator of a crime). All the following 'teenagers' are female:

- Journalist jailed for assault on teenager
- Man convicted of abusing teenager
- Kilkenny teenager tells of 100 mile terror drive

The adjective 'young' tends to be used in two contrasting ways. One is when 'good behaviour' is being referred to:

- Dazzling young musicians and top traditional players share tunes
- Hunt for young designer of the future
- Young science writers sought for competition

The other is in the case of victimhood or vulnerability:

- Drug hell of four young lives horrifies coroner
- Suicide of young gays 'swept under carpet'
- Extraordinary level of ecstasy killed young man

'Youngster' tends to be used in relatively benign contexts:

- Youngsters are giving adults a lesson in tolerance
- Youngsters believe ideal family has three kids
- Plea for 'at risk' youngsters

The same is true of 'young people':

- Young people offer simply worded solution to impasse at Drumcree
- Young people are concerned about jobs and drugs
- 600 young people to discuss peace

However, the term 'young people' is in fact very rarely used – it accounts for just four of the full newspaper sample of 608 items – and the term 'young person' doesn't appear in even one of the headlines (it does appear very occasionally in the body of news stories). This brings us back to Jeffs and Smith's

analysis: such terms are relatively *neutral* and simply denote status (an example is the fact that the Youth Work Act 2001 defines anyone under 25 as a ‘young person’ for the purposes of the Act). They are therefore of less interest and value to journalists (and others who communicate on public platforms and through mass media) than the other terms above, which clearly tend to have *connotations* and can therefore be called upon as the need or opportunity arises, depending on what image or message it is intended to convey. This – and the very fact of the ‘overlexicalisation’ of young people – is a distinctive feature of their social position in our society, and is clearly related to the ease and frequency with which they can be stereotyped.

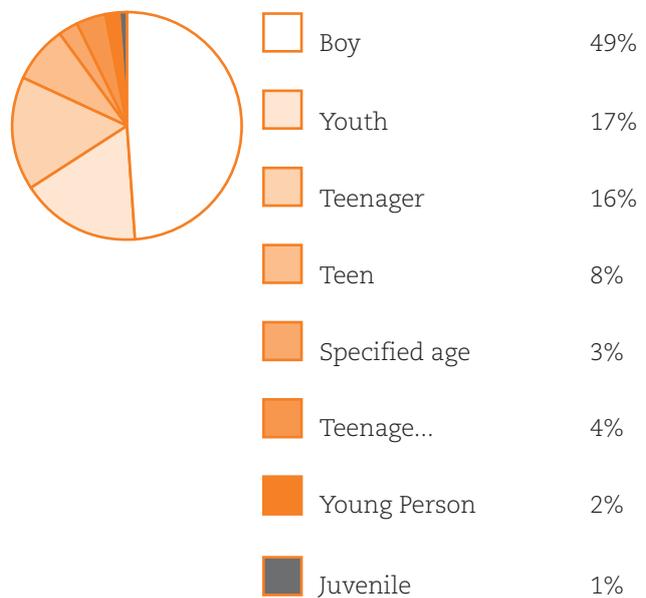
We have already seen that the stereotypes can vary for young men and young women, and that the difference in representation can itself be characterised as stereotypical. We can explore the difference further by looking more closely at the language used for referring to males and females, and in particular at uses of the terms ‘boy’ and ‘girl’. Given the points made in the first section of this paper about the social and political significance of words and of the ‘act of naming’ (Bourdieu 1991: 105), any substantial difference in the usage of ‘boy(s)’ and ‘girl(s)’ – which are, on the face of it, simply equivalent, ‘parallel’ terms for young males and females – might be interpreted as saying something significant about gender relations in our society, or at least about media representations of them.

Analysis of the 248 news stories by age, gender and headline word allows us to address this question. What emerges is a striking difference in the pattern of

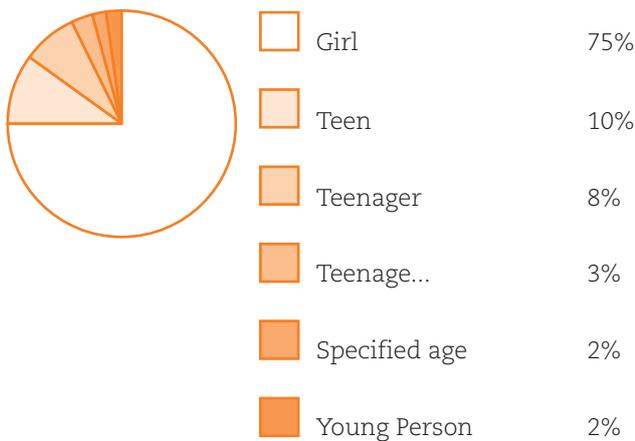
‘naming’ for young men and women, a difference which grows more marked as they grow older. Figures 4-7 illustrate the pattern diagrammatically.

Figures 4 and 5 provide a comparison of the words used to refer to young people aged between 12 and 16 inclusive, approximately the years of puberty and the beginning of the physical transition into adulthood. For males, ‘boy’ is used in almost half of all cases, with ‘youth’ and ‘teenager’ occurring in approximately equal proportions (16% and 15% respectively) and other words or terms in very small numbers of cases. For females, ‘girl’ is used in three quarters of all cases, with ‘teenager’ and ‘teen’ at 8% and 6% respectively, and other words used very rarely.

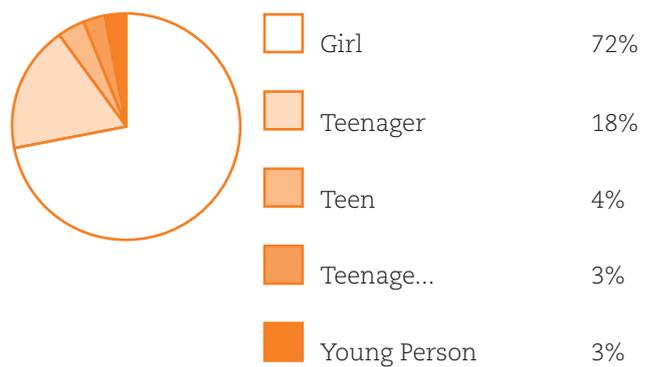
**Figure 4.**  
**Terms used for males 12-16.**



**Figure 5.**  
Terms used for females 12-16.

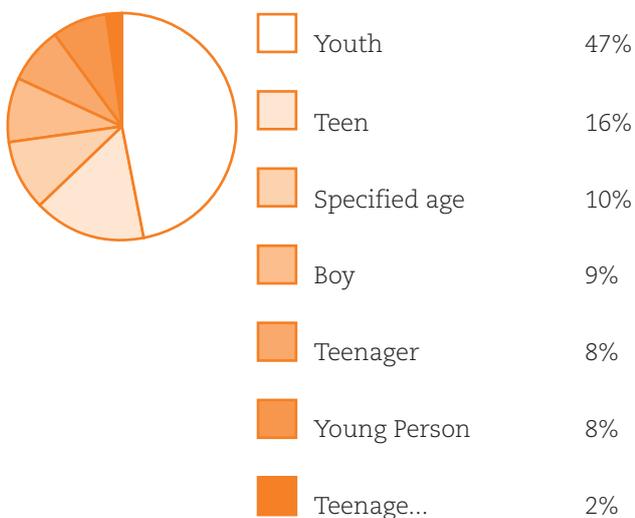


**Figure 7.**  
Terms used for females 17-21.



Figures 6 and 7 provide the same data for the older young people in the study, those aged between 17 and 21 inclusive, when the ‘age of majority’ is reached and important steps are taken in the social transition to adulthood. Among males, this is reflected in the fact that the proportion referred to as ‘boy’ has fallen from half to 8%, while ‘youth’ has increased in frequency to 40%. For females, however, the ‘girls’ still account for 72% of references, hardly down at all on the figure for the younger age group.

**Figure 6.**  
Terms used for males 17-21.



Of course, many people would argue that these figures simply express a distinctive – but relatively insignificant and certainly ‘harmless’ – aspect of Irish culture and Irish society (and other similar societies), which has nothing to do with stereotyping or with social inequality. However, there is evidence that such patterns of language use are indeed related to other aspects of social life and social interaction, including prejudicial attitudes and material inequalities. For instance, a social psychological experiment (Kitto 1989) which required that the subjects allocate female job applicants to different types of occupation – some ‘high-status’, some ‘low-status’ – found that the females referred to as ‘girls’ by their referees tended to be considered more suitable for the low-status positions, while those described as ‘women’ were deemed suitable for the high-status ones, *even when all other details (age, extent and relevance of previous experience etc.) were the same*. This suggests a clear link between language use and stereotyping (based on both gender and age), and lends weight to the argument that referring to adult as well as younger women as ‘girls’ is more than just ‘a harmless linguistic convention’ (Banyard and Grayson 1996: 142).

## News Features

The main point made so far in this chapter is that press representations of young people are profoundly stereotypical, overwhelmingly tending to portray them as in one way or another problematic: as *being* a problem or as *having* problems. The argument has been based largely on a quantitative analysis of news stories and news headlines presented 'routinely' as part of overall news coverage in the daily newspapers. Is the pattern different, however, when the press make a point of devoting *particular* attention to young people, through feature items and 'survey specials', where the opportunity clearly exists to present a more rounded or balanced picture? The following two examples are drawn from different types of newspaper, a Sunday tabloid and a daily broadsheet.

Over two weeks in 1998, the *Sunday World* presented the findings of what it called 'Ireland's first major survey on our youth'. The front page headline on the first week (February 8th 1998) was 'TEEN SEX: THE FACTS', with the sub-heading 'What our children are REALLY getting up to'. (The notion that young people are 'getting up to' something and that the media's job is to 'lift the lid' on this surreptitious behaviour recurs with remarkable regularity in the history of media studies.) The second week it was 'TEENS DRUG DRINK SHOCK'. Fifteen pages were devoted to the survey over the two weeks, and only in the last two of these pages did *any* aspects of young people's lives and lifestyles other than those related to drink/drugs or sex get addressed. In the first week, the only 'positive' headline appeared on the final page of the survey coverage, and was the smallest headline of all: 'There's hope for

the future'. In the second week, the final two pages – as already mentioned – deal with everything *except* drink/drugs and sex: television, exercise, sport, music, computer games, food, cinema, nightlife, family, friends, love and career. These two pages have a generally positive tone, but are the only two pages in this second instalment to be in black and white.

In September 2003, *The Irish Times* ran a three day series of front page stories, also with inside 'spreads', based on what it billed as a 'comprehensive opinion poll of young people and their social values today'. The headlines over the three days were all focused on 'problems':

Three out of five 15 to 17 year-olds drink alcohol, youth poll finds

One in four 15 to 17 year-olds have had sex – poll

55% of young know of peer suicide attempts

On the first two days, in keeping with the headlines, the inside spreads were almost entirely devoted to drink/drugs and sex. The third day's spread dealt – in less depth – with a broader range of issues (health, media consumption, religion, politics) and included a prominent story with a relatively positive slant ('A media-literate and savvy generation'); but the overall emphasis of the series was unmistakably on the 'problematic' aspects of youth. The editorial comment on the final day reflected on the survey's findings.

Too often, when young people feature in [public] debates it is merely as a set of problems: too much drink, too many drugs, too many teenage pregnancies...[The poll] provides a detailed map of young Ireland which

confounds the stereotypes...It is also important to reflect that today's young people are arguably practising much more self-restraint than their parents at the same age...It is too easily forgotten in the sporadic outbreaks of moral panic that young people have choices in areas where their parents did not and that most of them are exercising those choices responsibly...The knowledge that most of our young people regard [Ireland] as a good place should encourage the rest of us to involve them in making it a better one.

These remarks are measured and balanced, but they seem somewhat incompatible with the actual coverage of the poll findings in the news pages.

All the newspapers included in the quantitative content analysis outlined earlier, and others examined qualitatively, share this tendency to portray young people in a problem-centred way, confirming a pattern found in research elsewhere (see the next chapter). Despite numerous differences between different types of newspaper - in relation to matters such as selection of news items, grammar, vocabulary, style and length of headline, use of visuals, depth of analysis, overall tone - they all operate on the basis that when it comes to stories featuring young people, what the public wants to read about (what sells newspapers in other words) are stories focusing on sex and drugs. Whether that is what the public wants or not, it is a strikingly stereotypical representation, based on what appears to be a shared 'discursive reserve' (Ferguson 1998) of ideas and assumptions about the nature of youth, permeating a variety of (otherwise contrasting) media institutions and organisations.

## Just the Way Things Are?

A number of responses are possible to data and interpretations such as have been presented in this chapter. One is that the media representations simply reflect the way young people are, and (in the case of the gendered patterns we have seen) the ways in which young men and women are different. In this view, the media just 'tell it like it is'.

However, it is clear from the focus group findings that young people see the media representations as distorted and misleading. They don't argue that the problematic behaviour portrayed in the media doesn't exist at all, but they believe that it is exaggerated and distorted, without adequate counterbalance. As regards the different portrayals of young men and young women, for example the fact that 80% of the 'crime stories' are about young men, it is true that the majority of certain types of crime are committed by young - and mostly working class - males (Tovey and Share 2003). It is equally true, however, that the vast majority of young males, working class and otherwise, have no involvement in crime at all. Despite this fact, the persistently negative nature of the media coverage can reinforce stereotypes in public life and public opinion (as reflected for example in the reference in a city development board strategy to 'people at risk of becoming involved in crime, such as youth').

In any case, there is no necessary connection between how often something happens and what proportion of newspaper space it receives. Newspapers and other media have their own criteria of 'newsworthiness' (Whittaker 2001) and there are often differences *between* newspapers in this

regard, so that what appears in the press does not relate in a straightforward way to what 'actually happens'. For instance, it is now widely accepted that 'white-collar crime' is a widespread phenomenon, but until relatively recently much of this behaviour was not perceived or defined as deviant or criminal (and was even often regarded as perfectly acceptable) and therefore it received little or no media attention. This clearly does not mean it was not happening (see McCullagh 1996).

Another response builds on this notion of newsworthiness, or what are sometimes called 'news values' (Hall 1981; Muncie 1984). This is the argument that the news media in general tend to deal in 'straightforward heroes and villains' (Platt 1999: 116) regardless of the group they are portraying: it is in their nature to focus on the extremes of experience – people who *have* problems or people who *are* problems. There is certainly some truth in this, and news coverage of adults is often centred on problems of one kind or another. However, even a cursory glance at a newspaper (or broadcast news programme) will confirm that it is also common to see stories featuring adults (and particularly men) engaging with the world around them in a variety of ways, often very positive and constructive ways, rather than in the rigidly polarised and strikingly stereotyped ways that appear with such frequency and force in the case of young people. Moreover, given their relative power and influence the media have a responsibility to take particular care in their portrayal of groups with substantially less power or influence, especially more vulnerable and marginalised groups. In consistently treating young people as problematic, as

predominantly different and difficult, the media are themselves actually helping to construct and sustain the 'problem' of intergenerational relations. (See Devlin 2003)



# Chapter 5

## Stereotyping of Young People: Some Findings from Abroad



There has to date been very little research in Ireland into the stereotyping of young people, and the limited research that does exist has focused on media stereotypes, particularly in the press (Devlin 2003, 2005). In other countries where more extensive research has been carried out, the media have also received most attention to date – reflecting the widespread recognition among social scientists of the importance of the media in influencing other aspects of public discourse – but recent years have seen the publication of research into the stereotyping of young people in the wider community. This chapter will present a summary of the findings of some relevant research in Britain, Australia and the United States of America.

### Britain

Research into media representations of young people in Britain dates back to the early 1980s. Two separate studies of press coverage of ‘adolescents’ (Porteous and Colston 1980; Falchikov 1985) produced results which were very similar both to

each other and to the Irish findings presented in the last chapter, with a preponderance of news stories portraying young people as victim or as criminal. One of these studies concluded that the newspapers provided ‘an unimaginative view of adolescents, feeding their readers with a diet of glitter, shock and horror, and self-righteous indignation. Such a menu is generally unedifying, factually incorrect and socially divisive’ (Porteous and Colston 1980: 206).

This view appears to be shared by the authors of a more recent study sponsored by Children’s Express, a British organisation which actively involves children and young people in media production, in writing and editing news stories themselves. After monitoring national newspaper output for one week, the authors told a conference in 1998 that they could discern ‘seven deadly stereotypes’. In order of frequency, these were:

- 'Kids as victims'  
31.5%
- 'Cute kids' (gratuitous images)  
26.7%
- 'Little devils' (children being 'demonised')  
10.8%
- 'Kids are brilliant' (exceptional children)  
9.7%
- 'Kids as accessories' (i.e. the property of parents)  
8.4%
- 'Kids these days!' (adults' nostalgia for the past)  
7.5%
- 'Little angels' (who can do no wrong)  
5.4%

The Children's Express study focused on younger children as well as older children and adolescents, and this is likely to have had an impact on the findings. In any case, the precise terminology or distinctions made are less significant than the overall point which struck the team of young researchers: 'children appear over and over again [in the media] in very specific categories' (Neustatter 1998).

Further evidence of this is provided in a study conducted by MORI (Market and Opinion Research International) for the British magazine *Young People Now* in 2004. As well as analysing media coverage, MORI conducted two focus group discussions with young people to ascertain their reactions. One group consisted of young people in school, another of young people not in education, employment or training. MORI concluded:

[Both] these groups perceive negative stereotyping in the press and feel that it affects their everyday lives in terms of how adults view them when they are out in public places with their friends.

They also believe that journalists are quick to take a moral high ground in terms of assessing young people's behaviour. However this is seen as a hypocritical stance, given that journalists are also believed to be prone to exaggeration in order to sell papers and make money: *'They'll get anything to put in there if they're short of something to write. They don't care if it hurts someone's reputation.'*

This is in line with earlier MORI research (2003) which found that of a sample of 914 people aged 11-18 years old, two-thirds (64%) said they would not trust a journalist to tell them the truth.

## Australia

In Australia, a comprehensive study of 'community attitudes' to young people (Bolzan 2003) included a comprehensive national monitoring of media items featuring young people over a period of one week in 2000. This study included electronic as well as print media, and the pattern was broadly similar in both:

...[B]oth emphasised young people as vulnerable and needing help, with such items accounting for 41% of all responses. The construction of young people as victims, at around 17-18% of all items, appears to have been almost as common as their portrayal as 'bad' [18%]. The items featuring 'good behaviour', while present, were overshadowed by the number of items

dealing with 'problematic' issues associated with young people. (Bolzan 2003: 73)

This is broadly in line with the Irish findings presented in the previous chapter, and the British findings summarised above. So too is Bolzan's finding that while stories reporting young people's 'good behaviour' were fairly evenly divided between young men and women, stories of 'bad behaviour' tended to be about young men. She also draws attention to a linguistic pattern which echoes points made earlier.

Certainly the media very clearly identified 'youth' with problems and were more inclined to make a distinction in their reporting between problematic 'youth' and the more positively presented 'young people'. (Bolzan 2003: 79)

Bolzan states the rationale for paying close attention to such representations of young people:

Despite the debates over the precise role of the media, the significance of media in both indicating and shaping community attitudes is widely accepted. The role of the media in creating and maintaining the dominant discourse may significantly contribute to the way in which young people are currently perceived. The media may also reflect current perceptions. (Bolzan 2003: 19-20)

To get a sense of these 'current perceptions', Bolzan also carried out a telephone survey in which a random sample of almost 1,300 adults were asked an open-ended question regarding the words, images or phrases which best described their own view of young

people. The responses were analysed as falling into three broad clusters and a fourth very small category:

- Young people as 'frightening, lazy or selfish' (39%)
- Young people as 'positive, ambitious, hard working and happy' (35%)
- Young people as 'devalued, victimised or neglected' by society (24%)
- Young people as being offered 'great opportunities' by society (2%)

The author's conclusion is that the dominant discourses identified in the survey are 'undeniably negative, whether in terms of the personal characteristics of the young people or in terms of the way they have been treated and are provided for by society' (Bolzan 2003: 26). Again, this parallels the 'being problems/having problems' pattern identified earlier.

Bolzan's research also included focus group discussions (19 in all) with various significant 'community sectors' including parents, teachers, police, youth workers and policy-makers. Here there were 'clear differences' as compared with the community survey.

First, positive discourses of young people were much more dominant than negative ones, and more strongly represented than they were in the community survey...[C]ommunity members who knew young people through meaningful relationships and contacts had more positive opinions of them than those who did not. (Bolzan 2003: 65)

The word 'meaningful' is important here, and Bolzan comes back to it several times. It is the *nature* of the relationship and contact between young people and adults that matters, and many of the adults in her focus groups had close and sustained contact with young people in positive (or relatively positive) environments and circumstances. She found that the most negative responses came from members of the police, who described young people as 'having limited values, a lack of morals and being easily influenced by peers'. However, such responses were qualified by an acknowledgement that the police were 'usually exposed to young troublemakers'; and it was in fact a member of the police who said, in the context of a discussion about young people's styles of dress: 'Adults find it hard to get a grip that wearing a hat on backwards doesn't make you a criminal' (Bolzan 2003: 52-53).

The final strand of Bolzan's research involved 76 in-depth interviews with young people themselves, from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Her main findings were that:

- Young people believed that community perceptions of them are predominantly negative (to do with criminal activity, drugs and alcohol, fear of young people in groups), and they felt deeply about negative community attitudes.
- The quality of community attitudes was a central factor in determining whether young people felt positively about the place in which they lived.
- Some of the young people also reported positive experiences in which they felt affirmed and valued by adults. These were invariably in the context of

meaningful relationships, for example with parents, other relatives and teachers, who knew them well.

- While their perceptions of themselves and their peers were overwhelmingly positive, young people sometimes had negative opinions of other young people and could, when they had no evidence to the contrary, themselves accept the 'dominant negative discourse' or stereotype.

## United States of America

A series of studies of attitudes to young people in the media and in public opinion, conducted in the USA in recent years, have generated findings very much in line with those discussed above. One study (Amundson et al. 2000) examined television news coverage of young people, both at national 'network' level and on local channels. Nationally, it was found that there were very few youth-related stories (about 4%, or one in 25 of the total) which, given the sample size, hampered meaningful analysis on most variables. It was clear, however, that education was the most commonly occurring general theme, accounting for more than half of the news items. The only other themes occurring in significant proportions were crime (with young people as victims or perpetrators) and accidents.

Stories on local channels were both more numerous – at twice the rate of frequency of the networks – and more negative. Here, young people as victims of crime, perpetrators of crime, and victims of accidents were the three most commonly occurring themes: there were more than twice as many representations of crime and violence as there were of

educational issues or student achievement. It is suggested by the researchers that for journalists, when it comes to decisions about what aspects of young people's behaviour to highlight, 'if it bleeds it leads'. Overall, the pattern of young people being presented in problematic terms, 'being a problem or having problems' is once again echoed in these findings and in the authors' conclusions.

[L]ocal news presents a troubled and troubling image of American youth. Stories are disproportionately tilted towards visual and verbal images of the young as either dangerous or endangered, and of adolescence as a time of life associated with personal foibles and social disruption. (Amundson et al. 2000: 26)

As already suggested, representations of (and attitudes towards) young people may vary from one medium to another, or even within the same medium in different contexts. Stereotypes may therefore vary in prominence from one media source to another, or they may simply be replaced by different stereotypes. In her study of prime-time entertainment programmes, for instance, Heintz-Knowles (2000) found that young people tend to appear in a context not of crime or violence but rather of 'romantic relationships, friendships/popularity, and family issues'; and that 'TV youth' do not reflect the demographics of 'US youth', being 'slightly more likely to be female, and overwhelmingly white' (2000: 6). This is an example of a point made earlier in this report: even apparently 'positive' images or representations can be distorted and stereotypical.

Based on a review of empirical research into several different genres of American TV programming, Aubrun and Grady (2000b) provide the following summary.

- TV overall contributes to an impoverishment of people's understanding of youth, by reducing the 'teenager' category to a set of highly entrenched scripts.
- Local news is especially damaging in its reinforcement of narrow and negative stereotypes.
- Overall, script dramas do a better job of representing teenagers as a broad and diverse category.
- Representations of teenagers on TV very often reinforce their isolation from the rest of American society.
- The stereotypical TV teenager embodies (a caricature of) traditional masculine qualities.
- TV's effects on private understandings [i.e. of individual viewers] are mixed.
- Effects on American public discourse are especially pernicious. (Aubrun and Grady 2000b: 2)

This important question of the relationship between media representations and the attitudes and opinions of those who read/view/listen to such representations, and the relationship between 'private understandings' and 'public discourse', is addressed separately by the same authors in another study using in-depth 'cognitive interviews' with media users. Their report states that most of the adults interviewed:

- are aware of the negative model of teenagers that prevails in the media.
- are aware (at times) that this negative model is a negative stereotype rather than an accurate representation of the teenagers that they know.
- tend nonetheless to resolve this contradiction by judging their own experience to be exceptional, rather than by challenging the media frames. (Aubrun and Grady 2000a: 2)

These findings make it clear that stereotypes work in subtle and complex ways. A related study presents an even starker picture of how difficult it is to counter or dislodge stereotypical discourses or 'frames'.

...We observed astonishing unanimity in the way adults [in focus groups] discounted positive statistics about youth. Confronted with what was presented as a 'true news story' about recent trends among teenagers, adults consistently overlooked the positive data (which dominated the story) and focused instead on the few negative trends. When asked to re-examine the story and to explain why they thought it was indeed negative when there were so many positive trends, they first said they thought the numbers were not correct. When informed that they were indeed correct, they often found ways to re-interpret the numbers in order to result in a decline or a 'not good enough' conclusion. (Bales 2001: 3)



## Conclusion

Taken together, the findings summarised above, from three different countries all of which share many important features with the Irish context, provide a starkly negative picture of the way in which young people are perceived and represented both in the media and elsewhere in public life. Certainly there is substantial evidence that individual adults have positive views of young people. It may even be the case (we cannot say from this research) that *most* individual adults have positive views of young people; and the research shows in particular that adults who have 'meaningful relationships' with young people on an ongoing basis express very positive views about them. However, the research also suggests that, somewhat paradoxically, even these adults may often accept negative media stereotypes of young people as accurate representations of young people as a whole (as opposed to the young people they themselves have relationships with).

Some of the research summarized in this chapter has also borne out the findings of the focus group discussions with Irish young people presented earlier, confirming that young people do think that adults in general have very negative attitudes towards them, that they do care about this and are very much affected by it. One important finding, for instance, is that community attitudes have a considerable bearing on how young people feel about the area in which they live. This could obviously have an impact on how they treat the local environment, which in turn could exacerbate negative adult attitudes, and so on.

Some of the American research cited above suggests that young people can become 'proxies' (Bales 2001: 9) for various aspects of social change with which adults are uncomfortable, even if adults themselves are actively promoting or participating in such change. Thus, discussions about the 'youth of today' are as much about whether the country is on the 'right or wrong track' as they are about specific aspects of young people's lives (Bales 2001: 9). A similar point was made some years ago in an American study which suggested that the dominant image of 'youth in crisis' arose from the fact that youth was 'not just an age-group but a repository for social concerns' (Acland 1995: 10).

This can be interpreted as a form of scapegoating, and is in fact seen as such by at least some young people, as the following incisive remarks from a participant in one of the Irish focus groups show.

**Eamon:**

***You get pressures as well, to try and change the world, because they [adults] can't do it now, they can't go back and change it, so they try and put pressure on you to change it. So they try and...they try and tell us what to do, because they can't go back themselves...They're putting all the pressure onto us, 'it's the kids of today', they don't see themselves as being wrong.***



## Chapter 6

# Conclusions and Recommendations



This report has explored the subject of the negative stereotyping of young people and the ways in which young people themselves think they are perceived and treated by adults. Stereotyping was defined at the outset as the use of ‘a relatively rigid and oversimplified conception of a group of people, in which all individuals in the given group are labelled with the so-called group characteristics’ (Wrightsmann and Deaux 1981: 72). It was suggested that such conceptions or ideas are particularly significant because when they are widely shared they can be reflected and reinforced in a range of social institutions and practices. In addition to giving an overview of the nature and impact of stereotyping in general, and the results of some recent relevant research from abroad, this report has presented the findings of focus group discussions with young people in Ireland and a case study of the stereotyping of young people in the Irish media. These are summarized below.

### Findings from the Focus Groups

The focus group research found that young people believe themselves to be the subject of stereotypical ideas and images, and of prejudicial and discriminatory treatment based on such ideas and images. The young people’s experiences and opinions were not, of course, uniform. For example, young men thought they experienced more ‘hassle’ in public places than young women (and young women agreed that this was the case); young people with certain disabilities were conscious of *not* being stereotyped in the same way as other young people – but were *very* conscious of being stereotyped because of their disability; and young people in areas of socio-economic disadvantage in general reported more extreme cases of stereotyping and more fraught relationships with adults in their neighbourhoods.

However, it remains the case that in all the focus groups there was strong agreement that young people *in general* are stereotyped and treated unequally by adults *in general*. The media were regarded as particularly prone to stereotyping young people in very negative ways, ‘tarring them with the same brush’ by constantly associating ‘youth’ with crime, deviance, delinquency, drug and alcohol problems, sexual promiscuity and general disorderliness. The young people regarded the media as being concerned solely with commercial success, winning more viewers or selling more papers, regardless of the human cost or even of whether the depiction was accurate or representative.

The focus group participants also confronted this negative view in their own daily lives. In their local communities, they thought that they were often (and in some cases usually) regarded and treated with suspicion and disdain. One of their favourite ways of socialising was just ‘hanging around with friends’, but hanging around regularly led to hassle, particularly but not only for young men, because groups of young people were assumed to be either actual or potential trouble-makers. Being told to move on (by local adults or gardaí) was therefore commonplace, but in most cases there was nowhere to move on to, or at least nowhere that was attractive, enjoyable and safe, or from which they wouldn’t be told to move on again.

Relationships with the gardaí varied according to where the young people lived, being very negative in the most disadvantaged areas and quite positive in the least disadvantaged. Virtually all the young people seemed to have some

experience of being regarded with suspicion by security staff in shopping centres when they were shopping with friends, which was how they liked to shop. For young Travellers, this type of experience was compounded by anti-Traveller prejudice.

The young people’s experiences of school, and their views of how their teachers perceived and treated them, were mixed. There were some very positive reports of caring and supportive behaviour, but other accounts of being treated dismissively or harshly or even bullied. The young people in general felt most strongly about not being listened to (or not being believed if their ‘story’ conflicted with that of an adult) and not having a say in how schools were run. The view of school councils and similar initiatives were unenthusiastic, and there were experiences of such mechanisms being subjected to ‘vetting’ by teachers.

For the young people in the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) youth group, experiences of ‘coming out’, and being out, varied a lot according to school type and ethos. There was agreement that sexual orientation should be explicitly dealt with in anti-bullying policies and procedures, and also that the attitudes and behaviour of individual teachers were vitally important in ‘setting the tone’ for how young LGBT people were viewed and treated by other young people. The young people with disabilities spoke of constantly dealing with an education system that didn’t expect them to succeed; and of not even having the same subject choices as most students.

With very few exceptions the focus group participants’ experiences and opinions of politicians, and their perceptions of politicians’ attitudes towards young

people, were negative. Very often the point was made that since young people (under 18) couldn't vote they were of no interest to the politicians. The idea that young people 'don't care' about politics and therefore that there was no point allowing them to vote was itself seen as a stereotype by most participants; and most thought they should be entitled to vote younger, but they thought this was unlikely to happen since that would mean 'things would have to change'.

Overall, the message emerging from the focus groups is that, while there are certainly exceptions, the young people see their institutional relationships with adults as for the most part unequal, troubled, and rooted in stereotypical ideas about their attributes and abilities. There were several suggestions that training programmes for those who dealt with young people in a professional capacity (apart from youth workers, about whom the comments tended to be very positive) need to be improved, and that everybody - young people and adults - had to be prepared to change their attitudes and behaviour if more positive relationships, built on mutual respect, were to be built.

### Findings from the Case Study

It was found in the case study of the press that young people appear in the news in a very limited set of thematic contexts. The dominant categories of news story are those portraying young people in roles of *deviant or criminal* (usually involving violence) and *victim* (of assault, abuse or accident). In short, Irish news stories tend in the vast majority of cases to portray young people either as *being a problem* or *as having problems*, which is obviously a stereotypical

representation (and one, as already indicated, of which young people themselves are acutely aware). A comparison of the news reports with a sample of feature items, and of tabloid with broadsheet newspapers, found that the overall pattern of representation was consistent.

There were, however, gender differences in the representations. Stories about young men tend to focus more on criminality/deviance, stories about young women on victimhood and vulnerability, which is itself a rather narrowly stereotypical representation of the differences between the sexes. In addition to the gender pattern, there is a clear 'overlexicalisation' (there are many more ways of referring to young people in our culture than to adults) which among other things means that young people can be stereotyped in a *variety* of ways. For instance, the word 'youth' tends to be used in a very formulaic way in the context of stories about crime and deviance involving young men, while the other words (like 'teenager', 'youngster' and so on) often have more benign connotations. The lexical options can be called upon as the need arises, depending on what image or message it is intended to convey. The overlexicalisation of young people is a distinctive feature of their social position in our society, and is clearly related to the ease and frequency with which they can be stereotyped.

## Recommendations

### Resources

There is a need to address the factors which create or exacerbate tensions in the relationships between adults and young people at neighbourhood level. These include a lack of places and spaces – both indoor and outdoor – for young people to ‘hang out’ in the way they enjoy without it being seen as a problem.

- City and County Development Boards should, in consultation with young people and with adults at local level, consider how best to invest in building new relationships through the provision of new or improved resources and facilities.
- Vocational Education Committees should be provided with the resources necessary to enable them to begin carrying out their functions under the Youth Work Act 2001, which includes an assessment of the youth work needs of young people in their areas of operation.

### Decision-making

Young people are entitled to participate actively in all decision-making which affects their lives. Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that actions concerning children and young people should take account of their best interests, and Article 12 upholds their right to express an opinion, and to have that opinion taken into account, in matters or procedures affecting them. In keeping with this, one of the goals of the National Children’s Strategy is that ‘children will have a voice in matters which affect them...’.

- The recommendations for the improved working of school councils emerging out of recent research conducted for the National Children’s Office should be adopted and implemented.

### Relationships

There is a need for all those who work professionally with young people, who come into regular contact with young people in their working lives or who report on them in the media, to be informed about the nature and impact of negative stereotyping.

- Information about the negative stereotyping of young people, its impact and how to counter it, should be included on training programmes for members of the Garda Síochána, for journalists, and on all teacher training programmes. It should also be included on the training provided to security staff in shopping centres.
- The National Union of Journalists should develop guidelines for its members on the media coverage of young people and youth-related issues.
- Youth workers and youth organisations should examine and pursue ways of being more proactive in raising awareness at all levels of society of the nature of negative stereotyping of young people.

### Status

The persistent negative stereotyping of young people is in itself a diminution of their status. It can also serve to encourage or reinforce the unequal treatment of young people in other ways, including under the law.

- The Equality Authority and the National Youth Council of Ireland should seek sponsorship for a national media award scheme (along the lines of *Positive Images* in Britain or the *National Youth Media Awards* in Australia) to encourage and promote positive media representations of young people.
- The National Youth Council of Ireland and its member organisations should be supported by the Youth Affairs Section of Department of Education and Science in the establishment of a young people’s media programme in which young people would themselves research, write and produce materials for use in the professional media (similar to *Children’s Express*, UK).
- The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform should review the provisions of the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004, whereby the age ground applies only to people over 18. This means that, among other provisions, the prohibition of harassment by providers of goods and services and accommodation and by people in positions of authority in schools and other educational establishments does not apply – as far as the age ground goes – to people under 18. The age ground should be redefined to rectify this situation.
- The proposed Press Council and the Broadcasting Commission of Ireland should establish and monitor standards in relation to media coverage of young people so as to ensure stereotyping does not feature in the coverage.



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