

Occupational aspirations of children from primary school to teenage years across ethnic groups

A joint report by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies and the Runnymede Trust

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Summary of questions and findings

- **How do occupational aspirations of girls and boys from different ethnic groups compare?**
- **To what extent do they feed through into subsequent occupational outcomes?**

These are the questions addressed by this report based on large scale nationally representative data on boys and girls from age 7-age 14 and on young people aged 25.

It finds:

- Ethnic minority boys and girls have higher occupational aspirations (aspirations for well-paid jobs) compared to White children of the same sex.
- This is the case across the age range measured.
- While boys' aspirations tend to start higher and show some decline over time, the opposite is the case for girls
- This leads to some convergence between boys' and girls' aspirations overall.
- In most cases, ethnic minority boys and girls have higher aspirations than their White counterparts already at around age 7. This shows that minority group families are not 'socialising' their children into 'lower' aspirations.
- By age 14 gaps between minority group girls and White girls are marked, suggesting that as they move towards their GCSEs, minority group girls are particularly looking forward to good jobs.
- Comparing these aspirations with the wages of jobs actually held by ethnic minority children at age 25, ethnic minorities are not achieving the levels of occupational success they aspire to – with the exception of Indian young women.
- There is no evidence that ethnic minorities are 'choosing' to go into lower paid occupations.

August 2018

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The increasing educational attainment of boys and girls from minority ethnic groups is now well attested. Recent research has shown that all minority groups are now more likely to enter university than their white majority counterparts (Crawford and Greaves 2017), and the role of aspirations in shaping these higher participation rates has been extensively researched and discussed (Fernández-Reino 2017; Burgess 2015).

At the same time there is persistent evidence of labour market inequalities across ethnic groups (ONS 2014), particularly in relation to unemployment and economic activity, but also in relation to pay (Longhi and Brynin, 2017; Longhi et al. 2013). While discrimination is one factor implicated in these differences in labour market outcomes, lower economic activity rates (particularly among women from South Asian groups) have in some cases been attributed to different choices and preferences (Dale et al. 2006; Tackey et al. 2006).

One challenge in understanding how far differences in occupational preferences are part of the reason for differences in labour market outcomes is that, once in the labour market, people may respond to the opportunities and constraints they experience in the world of work and adjust their preferences and work patterns accordingly (Corrigall and Konrad, 2007; Kroska and Elman, 2009). Therefore, we cannot fully know what they would have wanted in the absence of these constraints. For example, if some men keep getting turned down for a particular career, then they may find a different occupation. Or if some women find

that job opportunities are not available to them, they may prefer to invest their energies in family.

But in childhood girls' and boys' occupational choices have not



been 'contaminated' by labour market (or family formation) experiences and are likely to much more closely reflect what they would ideally like to do or be. Through early socialisation, young people's aspirations and expectations of the adult world will be influenced by their family and family context, particularly at younger ages. So if there are family expectations that they 'aim high' or go into stereotypical roles, or if they see this in what their parents do, then their choices may reflect this. Later on, peer influences will play a role alongside these family influences. Aspirations will also be shaped by young people's evaluation of their own strengths as they progress through school.

As a result, if those from certain ethnic groups tend to be socialised into different occupational expectations and this shapes their occupational preferences and thence their labour market outcomes, then we would expect to see this in children's early occupational preferences.

There is, however, currently little evidence about whether or not this is the case. Inferences about occupational preferences are simply read off from adults' occupational outcomes. This report therefore addresses the following question: Are there differences in boys' and girls' occupational aspirations across ethnic groups in ways that can help to explain differences in labour market outcomes?

To our knowledge it is the first study to look at the evolution of occupational aspirations across ethnic groups in the UK.

This report addresses the following question:

- **Are there differences in boys' and girls' occupational aspirations across ethnic groups in ways that can help to explain differences in labour market outcomes?**

To answer this question, it uses a unique data set, the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), that follows children over time and looks across childhood aspirations measured at three ages (7, 11 and 14).

MCS follows the lives of over 19,500 children born in the UK at the turn of the century. The participants in the study were most recently surveyed in 2015 when they were aged about 14.

Using these data, this report investigates:

- a) Whether there is any evidence from their earliest aspirations that children from different ethnic groups are socialised into different expectations about their labour market roles.
- b) Whether there is any change over time in aspirations, as children gain information from peers and from their own school attainment, and whether this is different for boys and girls

We measure aspirations by linking to measures of average pay actually received currently in the aspired occupation. This gives us a simple and transparent measure of the 'value' of the aspirations, and whether that value is higher or lower for boys and girls of different



ethnic groups. To the extent that female dominated occupations tend to be lower paid on average, this measure of wages in the aspired occupation also gives us some insight into the extent that girls are following 'gender typical' tracks.

We complement this analysis of childhood aspirations with analysis of the occupational outcomes of a slightly older cohort, those in the Next Steps study, whose labour market outcomes were measured when they were 25 in 2016.

Next Steps follows the lives of around 16,000 young people born

in 1989-90 who were in Year 9 in 2004 at state or independent secondary schools across England. The study began when participants were aged 13-14, and the most recent survey took place in 2015-16 when they were about 25.

This enables us to address the final element of our research question:

- c) Can differences in occupational aspirations help us to understand wage differences in adult life? That is, are those who end up with lower average pay more likely to aspire to lower paying occupations, and vice versa?

What do we know about the influences on young people's occupational aspirations in general?

Parents are key influences on young people's aspirations. Their role in shaping educational aspirations of young people have been noted in a number of studies (e.g. Strand 2014; Goodman et al. 2011; Chatzitheochari and Platt 2018). In relation to occupational expectations, Polavieja and Platt (2014) showed how the extent to which children's preferences were gendered was influenced by the level of gendered segregation in the occupations of their parents.

Such gendered preferences in childhood have long-term consequences in the labour market: while children do not necessarily achieve the exact occupations that they originally want to do, those who have more segregated preferences do end up in more segregated occupations. It is self-evident that while children may be over-ambitious in some of their choices – the child who wants to be a doctor may end up a pharmacist – they are unlikely to achieve occupations that are substantially higher than those they aspire to – the child who wants to be an air steward is unlikely to end up as a pilot.

Platt and Polavieja (2016) also showed how parents shaped the gender role attitudes of their children by both their own attitudes and their enactment of gendered roles, and that this had long term consequences for subsequent patterns of domestic division of labour. Inequality in the domestic division

of labour has been strongly linked to labour market inequalities (Lyonette and Crompton 2015).

Studies have also shown that social class background matters for occupational choices – with those from more advantaged backgrounds aiming 'higher' (Polavieja and Platt 2014). Children's own educational performance is also highly relevant. Children who do not go on to tertiary education are clearly unlikely to achieve degree-level jobs, and those whose performance does not suggest they can attain such degree-entry jobs are less likely to aspire to them.

How might this be relevant for children from different ethnic groups?

What might these existing insights lead us to expect about ethnic groups differences in occupational aspirations? We know that labour force participation and full-time work varies across men and women of different ethnic groups. Participation rates are lower than average among South Asian, particularly Pakistani and Bangladeshi, women (ONS 2014); and full-time work is higher among Black Caribbean and Black African women (Longhi and Brynin 2017). This might lead boys and girls from these different groups to aspire to more or less gender-typical occupations as a result of 'role-modelling' of 'breadwinner' and 'carer' roles within the family (Platt and Polavieja 2016). Since female-dominated occupations are likely to be lower status and lower paid on average, this could imply that girls from



South Asian groups might ‘aim low’. Similarly South Asian women are more likely to hold traditional gender role attitudes than White, Black Caribbean and Black African women (Khouidja and Platt 2017). This could again lead to South Asian girls aiming ‘lower’ than Black girls. Part-time work tends to be higher among minority group than majority group men; as does temporary work, and unemployment (Longhi and Brynin 2017; ONS 2014). This could then negatively impact minority group boys’ expectations of their labour market options.

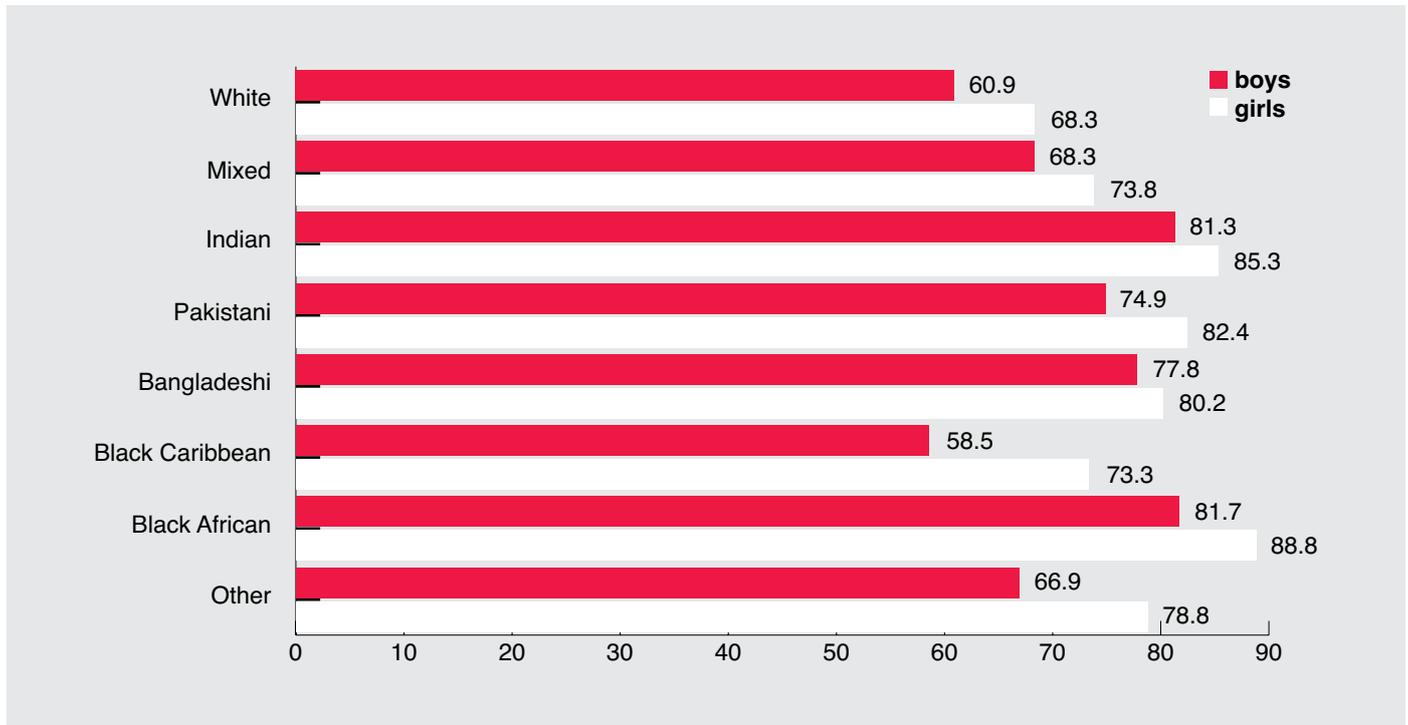
At the same time we know that educational aspirations are higher among minority groups (Fernández-Reino 2017), and among girls of all groups (see Figure 1). Educational attainment is also higher among minorities, particularly Chinese and Indian minorities (DfE 2016). All minorities, moreover, are now more likely to participate in higher education than the white majority (Crawford and Greaves 2015). This might imply expectations of ‘good’ jobs with high rewards are more likely among minority group girls and boys, compared to the majority.

Finally, we know that minority group parents are much more likely to be socio-economically disadvantaged (Nandi and Platt 2011); and when in work, men and women show different patterns of occupational segregation across ethnic groups (Blackwell and Guinea-Martin 2005). This might lead to lower occupational expectations among their children and to occupations that are less well-rewarded.

On balance, current evidence might lead us to expect lower occupational expectations among minority group girls and boys, compared to majority group boys and girls, in particular among Pakistani and Bangladeshi girls.

To test whether this is the case, we use a unique data source that tracks a large, nationally representative sample of children over time from birth and which asked them about their occupational preferences at ages 7, 11 and 14. We can also adjust for other characteristics than ethnicity, such as cognitive skills and family background, which might be relevant for their occupational choices. We describe the data next.

FIGURE 1:
Educational aspirations of teenagers, self-evaluated probability of likelihood of going to university among boys and girls, average across ethnic groups



Source: MCS, Age 14 survey. Children were asked on a scale of 0-100 how likely they thought it was they would go to university.

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) has been following the lives of over 19,500 children since they were born in the UK at the turn of the new century. It is one of four longitudinal studies managed by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies. Data have been collected when the children were aged around 9 months, 3 years, 5 years, 7 years, 11 years and most recently 14 years (Calderwood et al, 2015).

Children were asked “When you grow up what would you like to be?” at the age 7, 11 and 14 surveys. These measures are the main source of this study. We use responses from the 6,242 girls and 6,272 boys who provided answers to this question. While the children were interviewed around their 7th, 11th and 14th birthdays, the actual ages covered run from around six-and-a-half to around 15-and-a-half years old, providing an almost continuous set of ages across this range which we can explore in our analysis.

The children’s verbatim responses were coded to standard ‘SOC codes’. From those codes, we can match the chosen job to the average characteristics of those jobs, in particular its contemporary wage, using information on occupations from the Labour Force Survey. Given the skewed distribution of wages we log-transform them, to give an approximately normal distribution. In describing the results we can transform these ‘log wage’ values back into £s.

By linking the stated aspiration to its hourly wage, we can plot the ‘value’ of the job for each child over time. While we would not expect children to end up in exactly the job that they aspire to, the extent to which they are aspiring to higher or lower paying occupations is an indication of their orientation towards the future labour market.

Ethnic group of the children is measured according to ONS categories at a partially aggregated level, namely White groups, Mixed groups, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean, Black African. Results for the remaining ‘Other’ groups (including a small number of Chinese children) are not reported.

Given that we are following the same children over time we estimate ‘growth curve’ models, which take account of individual-level variation in occupational choices, and allows us to concentrate on differences in characteristics between children (such as ethnic group or family background). We estimate separate models for boys and girls.

We first show unadjusted models, with only ethnicity as a predictor of the occupational choices. We then show results adjusting for other potentially relevant factors. These additional factors are:

- **Season of birth** (those who are young for their year have been shown to have poorer school outcomes on a range of measures and might be expected to have less ambitious aspirations)
- **Cognitive skills** (those who have stronger academic ability would be expected to aim higher)
- **Expectations of staying on to post-compulsory schooling** (those who want to leave school at 16 are likely to be anticipating going into lower paid jobs)
- **Parental expectations of university attendance** (parents’ ambitions for their children may extend to the sorts of jobs they envisage; and those without a prospect of university education are unlikely to aspire to degree-entry jobs)
- **Self-esteem** (children’s self-esteem has been linked to occupational ambition as well as to non-typical occupational choices)
- **Family background, in terms of family income and highest parental educational qualifications** (advantaged family background is associated with more ambitious occupational choices)
- **Mothers’ work status** (whether or not the mother is in work has been associated with more traditional gender role attitudes and hence the sorts of jobs aspired to)

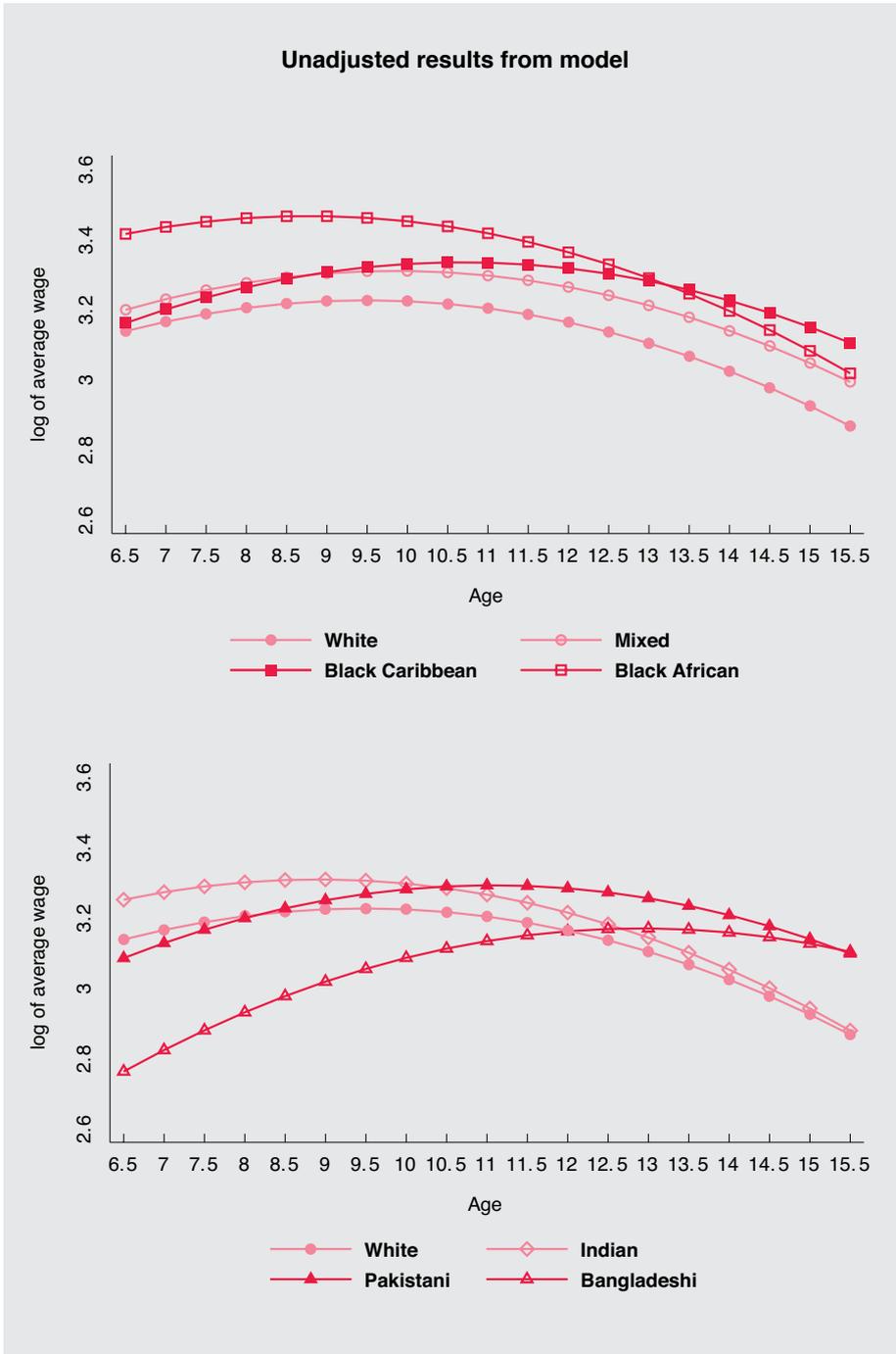
To evaluate how far the ‘value’ (in wages) of occupational expectations are revealed in labour market outcomes close to job entry (again before substantial feedback or family formation influences are likely to have taken place) we use Next Steps, a study of young people born in around 1990 who were surveyed from schools in England from age 13/14 till age 19/20 and then revisited at age 25. We describe the wages in the jobs occupied by these young people at age 25, and broken down by whether or not they had attained a degree (or higher qualification). This illustrates the extent to which job markets outcomes are consistent with or at odds with children’s aspirations.

FIGURE 2a:
The wage value of boys' occupational aspirations from ages 6.5-15.5

Occupational aspirations over childhood

Figure 2 shows the trajectories of occupational aspirations over the age range for boys. Figure 3 shows the patterns for girls.

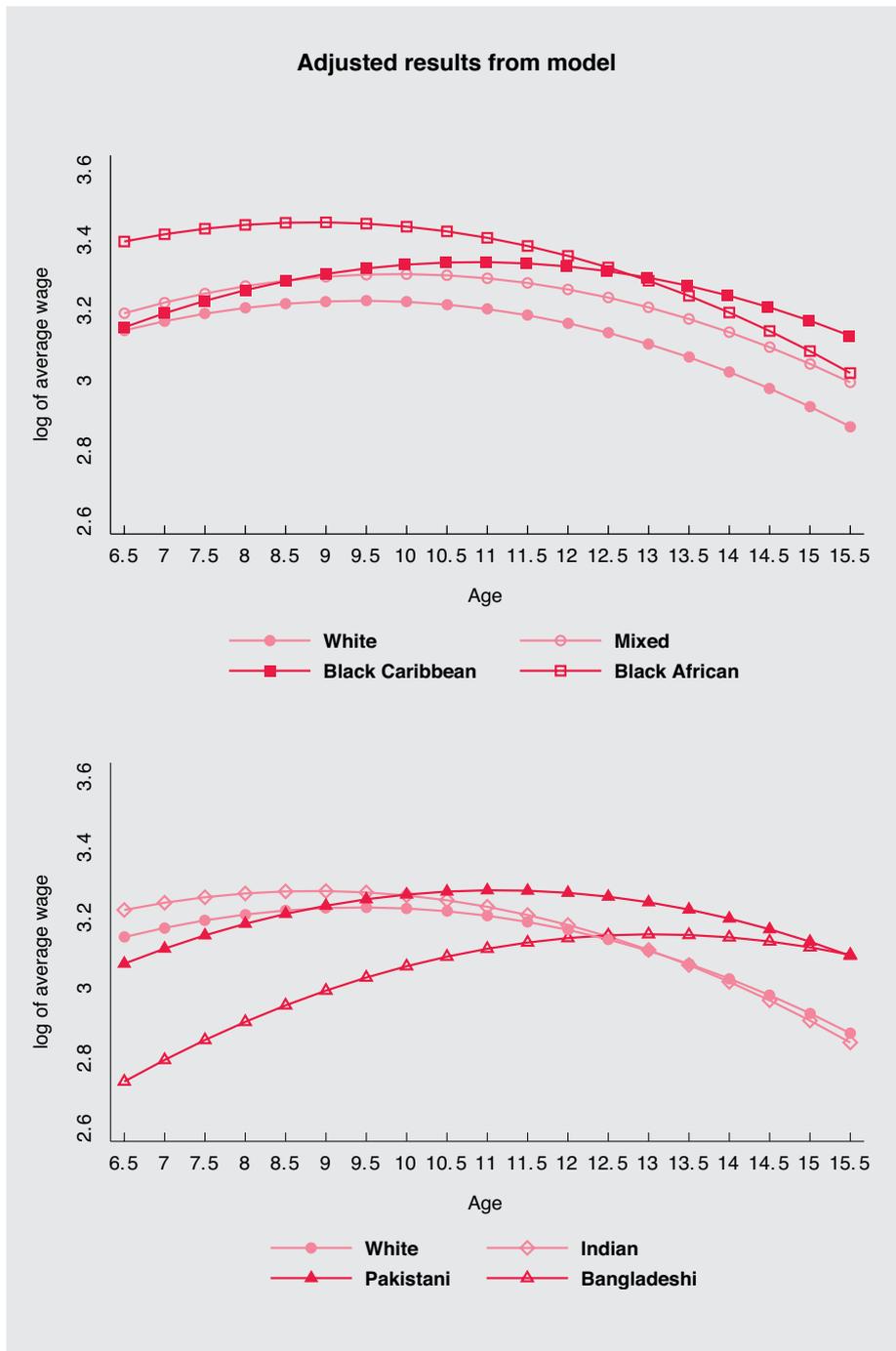
Figures 2a and 3a show the unadjusted results (that is, the results only taking ethnic group into account); and Figures 2b and 3b show the adjusted results (that is, taking account of season of birth, cognitive ability, educational aspirations, self-esteem and family background). The top panel covers Black Caribbean, Black African and Mixed as well as White, while the bottom panel covers Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi, as well as the comparison of the White majority group.



Source: Millennium Cohort Study, waves 4-6.



FIGURE 2b:
The wage value of boys' occupational aspirations from ages 6.5-15.5



Source: Millennium Cohort Study, waves 4-6.

The results show that, in general, ethnic minority children enter school with relative high expectations (at least for their sex). The exception is Bangladeshi boys, who start with aspirations for jobs that pay lower than those aspired to by their seven-year-old peers. But their aspirations then evolve so that they are 'aiming higher' than their White counterparts by age 14.

For the other ethnic groups there is little change over time among boys, just a slight decline towards age 14. Overall, Pakistani Black African and Bangladeshi boys have statistically significantly higher aspirations than their White majority peers, net of other characteristics. By the mid-teenage years, boys are aspiring to jobs with an hourly wage of between around £18 per hour and £24 per hour.

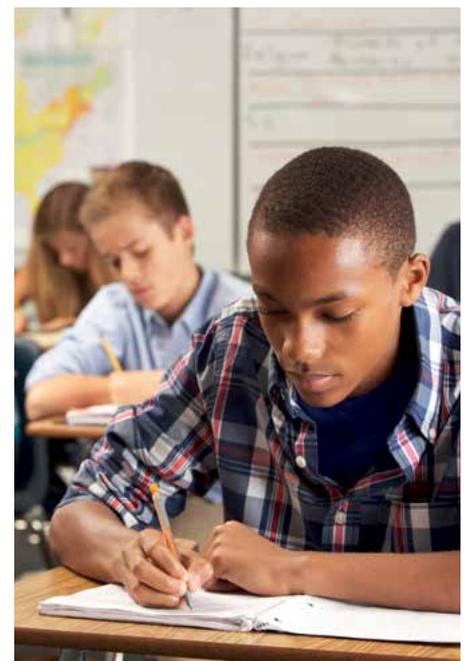
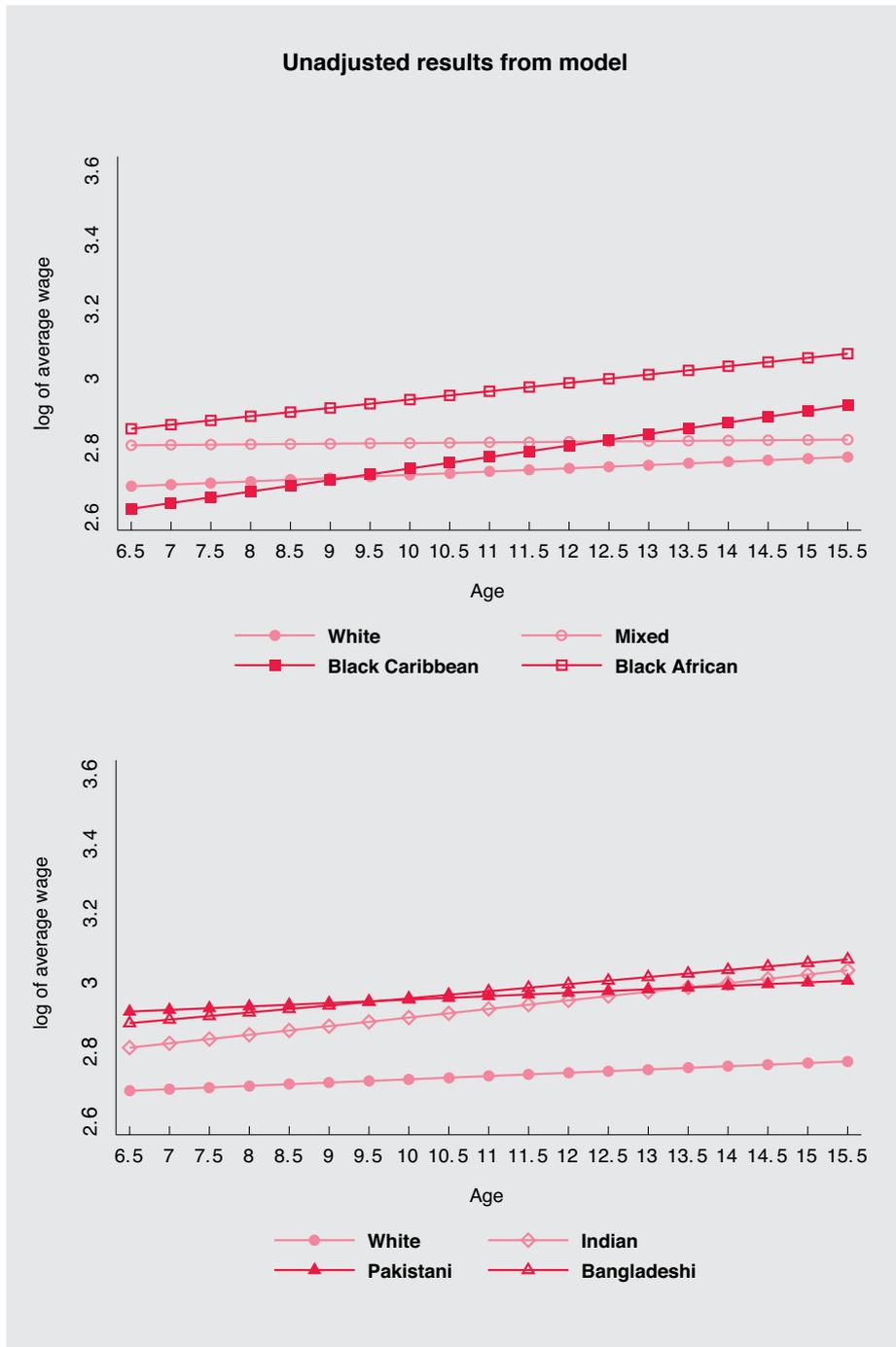


FIGURE 3a:
The wage value of girls' occupational aspirations from ages 6.5-15.5



Source: Millennium Cohort Study, waves 4-6. Note: the models for girls are straight rather than curved (as in the boys' models) as there was no evidence that the development of girls' aspirations was curvilinear, so we did not include an age squared term in the analysis of their outcomes.

Turning to girls, there is very little change in the wage of the jobs aspired to by White majority girls. Among other ethnic groups, Caribbean girls start a little lower, but end higher. Mixed ethnicity girls by contrast start a little higher but converge with those of White girls over time. Girls from Black African, Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic groups both start higher and end significantly higher than White girls, by the age of 14. The effect is that over time, there is some convergence among boys and girls overall in the value of the aspirations they aspired to. Specifically, expectations are for jobs returning on average between around £16 and £21 per hour.

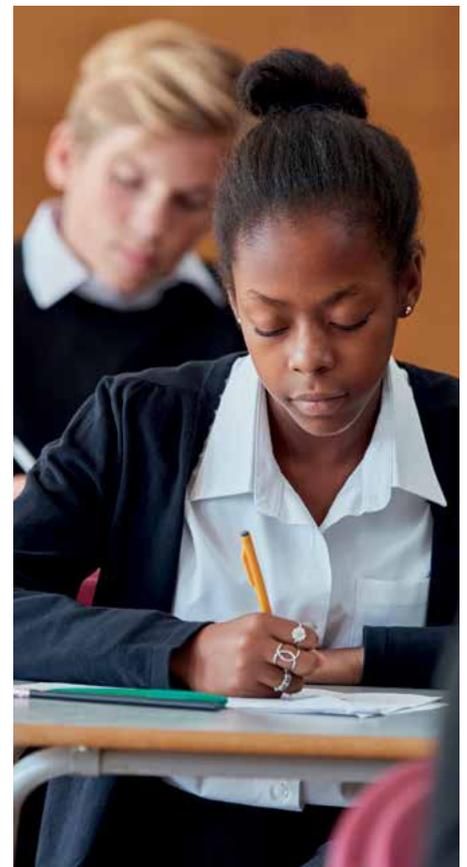
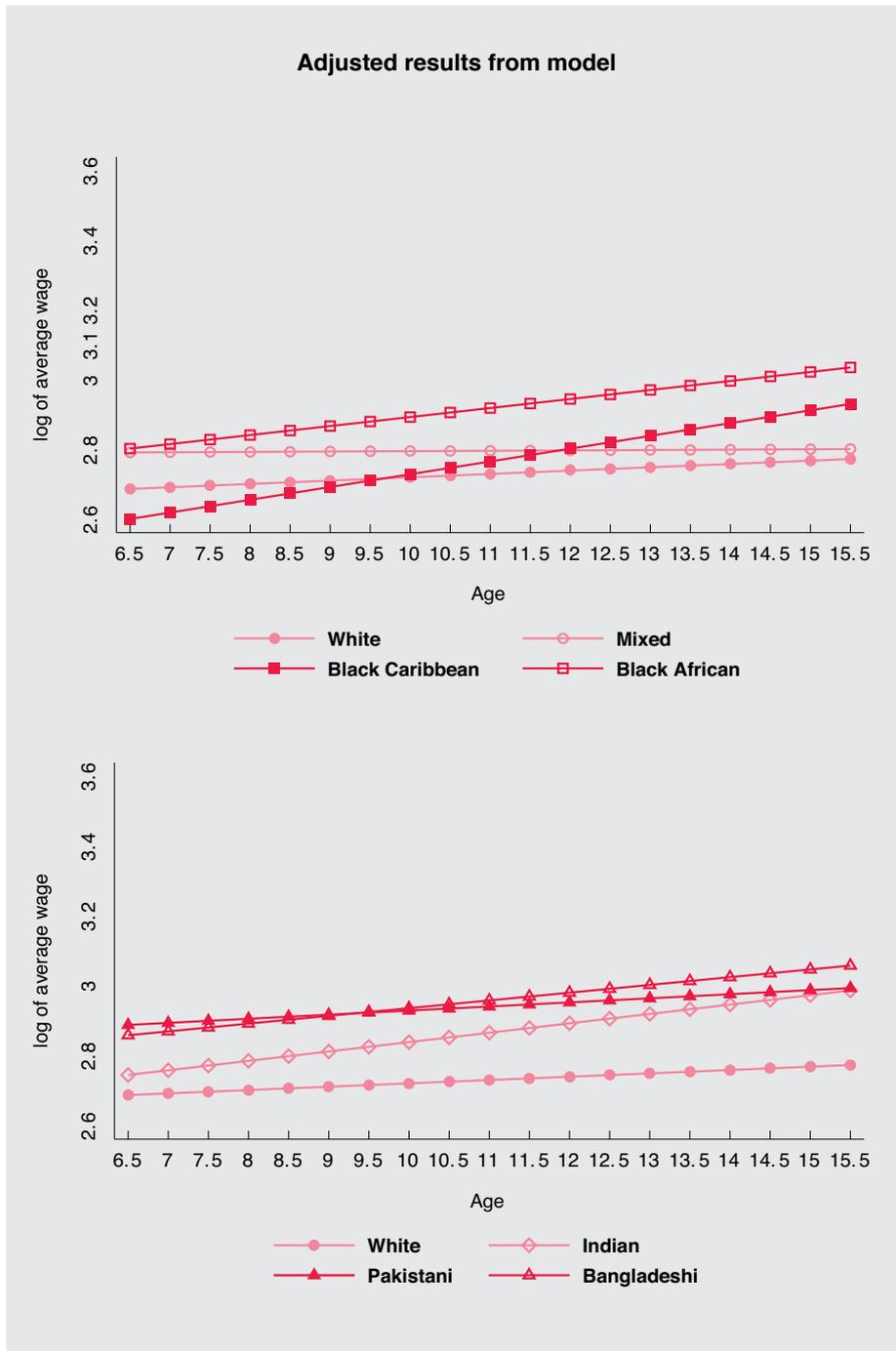


FIGURE 3b:
The wage value of girls' occupational aspirations from ages 6.5-15.5



Source: Millennium Cohort Study, waves 4-6. Note: the models for girls are straight rather than curved (as in the boys' models) as there was no evidence that the development of girls' aspirations was curvilinear, so we did not include an age squared term in the analysis of their outcomes.

The similarity between the adjusted and unadjusted models suggests that these differences cannot be accounted for by differences between ethnic groups in other family or individual characteristics, such as cognitive ability, family background or parental educational aspirations, even if these do have a bearing on children's occupational aspirations.

In sum, there is no evidence that minority parents' attitudes or behaviours result in 'suppressed' occupational aspirations – at least as measured by the monetary value of the occupations aspired to. Indeed, the opposite would seem to be the case.



What are the preferred jobs?

To put some additional tangible ‘flesh’ on these findings, we also illustrate in Figures 4 and 5, the top five occupations that girls and boys from the different groups identified. These, however, only accounted for between 33 and 59 per cent of the choices of girls and boys from different ethnic groups: their choices were overall very wide ranging, with some low paying as well as high paying choices.

The figures illustrate that, as the hourly wages would suggest, across the board children’s childhood aspirations are ambitious; more ambitious than the labour market positions they will find themselves in overall. As noted, children do not necessarily end up in their aspired occupation, but they will end up nearer it if they start off with higher expectations (for example the person who wants to become a doctor and ends up as a pharmacist).

Figures 4 and 5 also show some of the differences across groups as well as the points of commonality. The tendency to want to be a sportsman, particularly common among younger boys is one of the reasons why their aspirations ‘decline’ in value over time as they become more realistic. But the findings are similar even if we look only at those who did not aspire to being a sports professional. We can also see how minority group girls are overwhelmingly oriented towards the traditional ‘professions’ of doctor and lawyer (and to some extent accountant). (Note: the labels represent the names of the codes the actual answers were coded to, rather than the verbatim answers of the children themselves.)

It is clear, then that ethnic minorities are ‘aiming high’ or at least relatively high for their sex, compared to the white majority. Do these ambitions for relatively high-paid jobs result in comparably high wage employment?

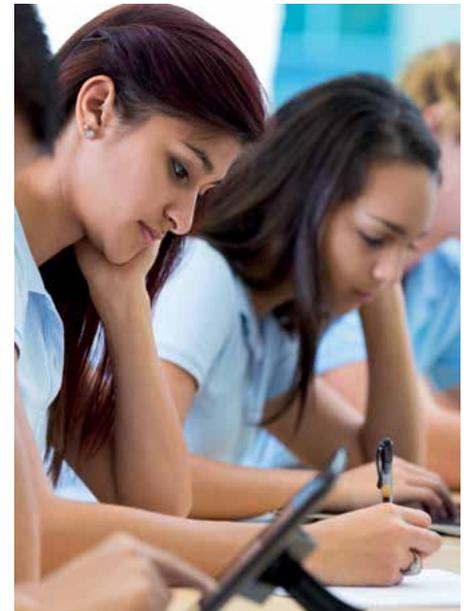


FIGURE 4:
Boys' 'top five' jobs by ethnic group

	White	Mixed	Indian	Pakistani	Bangladeshi	Black Caribbean	Black African
1	Sportsman 	Sportsman 	Legal profession 	Medical professional 	Legal profession 	Sportsman 	Sportsman 
2	Software developer 	Engineer 	Sportsman 	Sportsman 	Engineer 	Engineer 	Engineer 
3	Engineer 	Software developer 	Medical professional 	Engineer 	Accountant 	Accountant 	Software developer 
4	NCO (armed forces) 	Medical professional 	Architect 	Accountant 	Sportsman 	Software developer 	Actor/performer 
5	Secondary school teacher 	Actor/performer 	Software developer 	Police officer 	Medical professional 	Legal profession 	Medical professional 
% of group covered by top 5 choices	33.1	40.6	41.2	46.7	42.1	51.2	50.7

Source: MCS Age 7, 11 and 14 surveys. Verbatim responses mapped to SOC codes.

FIGURE 5:
Girls' 'top five' jobs by ethnic group

	White	Mixed	Indian	Pakistani	Bangladeshi	Black Caribbean	Black African
1	Secondary school teacher 	Medical professional 	Medical professional 	Medical professional 	Medical professional 	Medical professional 	Medical professional 
2	Actor/performer 	Secondary school teacher 	Legal profession 	Legal profession 	Legal profession 	Architect 	Legal profession 
3	Medical professional 	Actor/performer 	Secondary school teacher 	Nurse 	Secondary school teacher 	Actor/performer 	Secondary school teacher 
4	Vet 	Legal profession 	Dental 	Secondary school teacher 	Nurse 	Psychologist 	Actor/performer 
5	Legal profession 	Musician 	Accountant 	Dental 	Midwife 	Vet 	Midwife 
% of group covered by top 5 choices	29.1	42.8	45.7	54.3	58.7	47.5	48.0

Source: MCS Age 7, 11 and 14 surveys. Verbatim responses mapped to SOC codes.

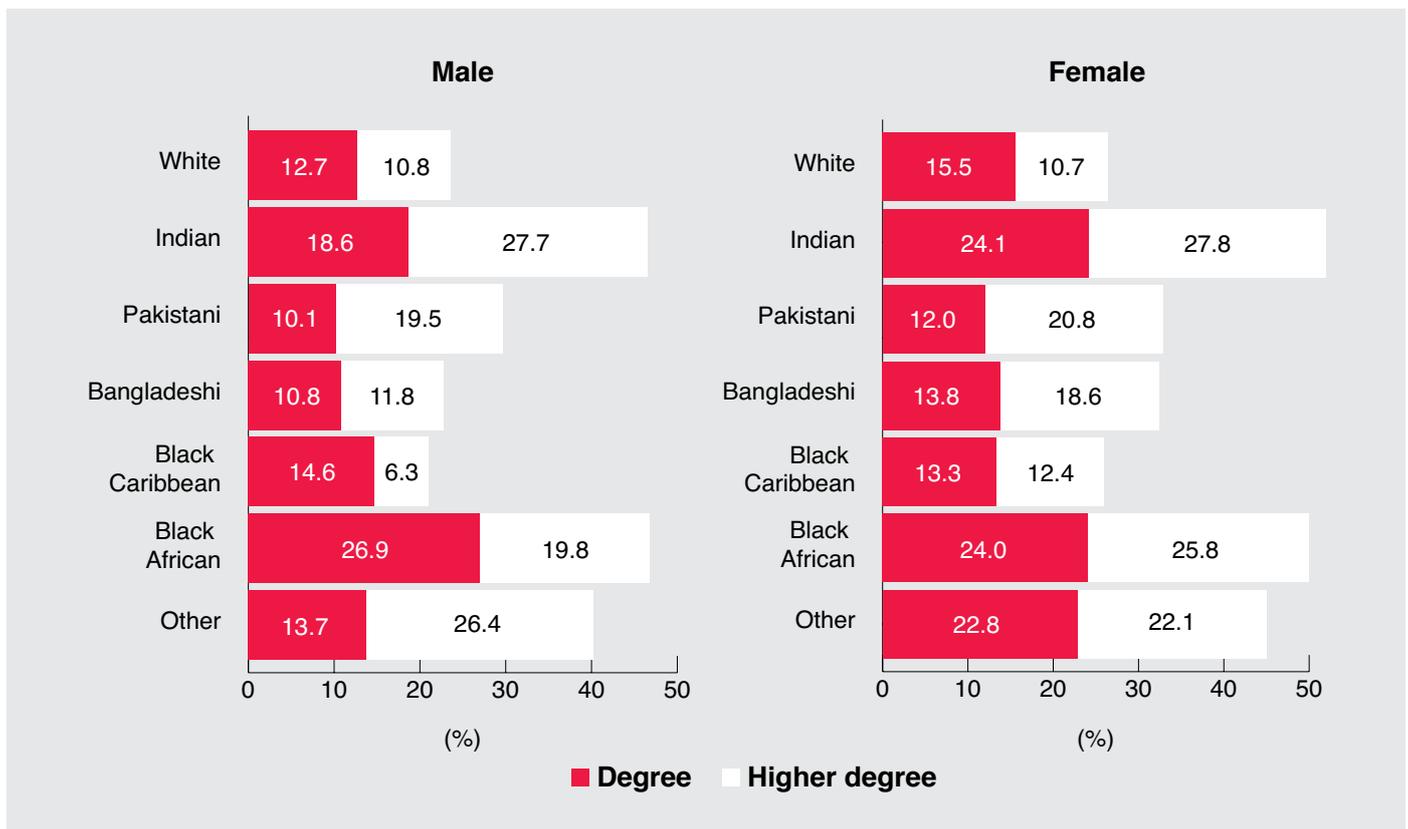
What happens in terms of early occupational outcomes?

We explore this question with a cohort who are only around 10 years older than these children and who have recently entered the labour market. We use Next Steps data on young people aged 25, who were surveyed in 2015/16.

We examine the gross weekly pay received by these young men and women in the jobs they are in at this age. While their occupational progression is likely to continue, starting points are also important for future careers. We look at wages at age 25 by whether or not they have degree level qualifications. As we saw before, ethnic minorities are aspiring to higher education with some confidence, and Figure 6 shows how far that aspiration is being realised. Therefore their aspirations do not seem to be 'unrealistic' at least as far as education is concerned, particularly among women.



FIGURE 6:
Attainment of degree or higher degree by ethnic group among 25-year-olds (%)



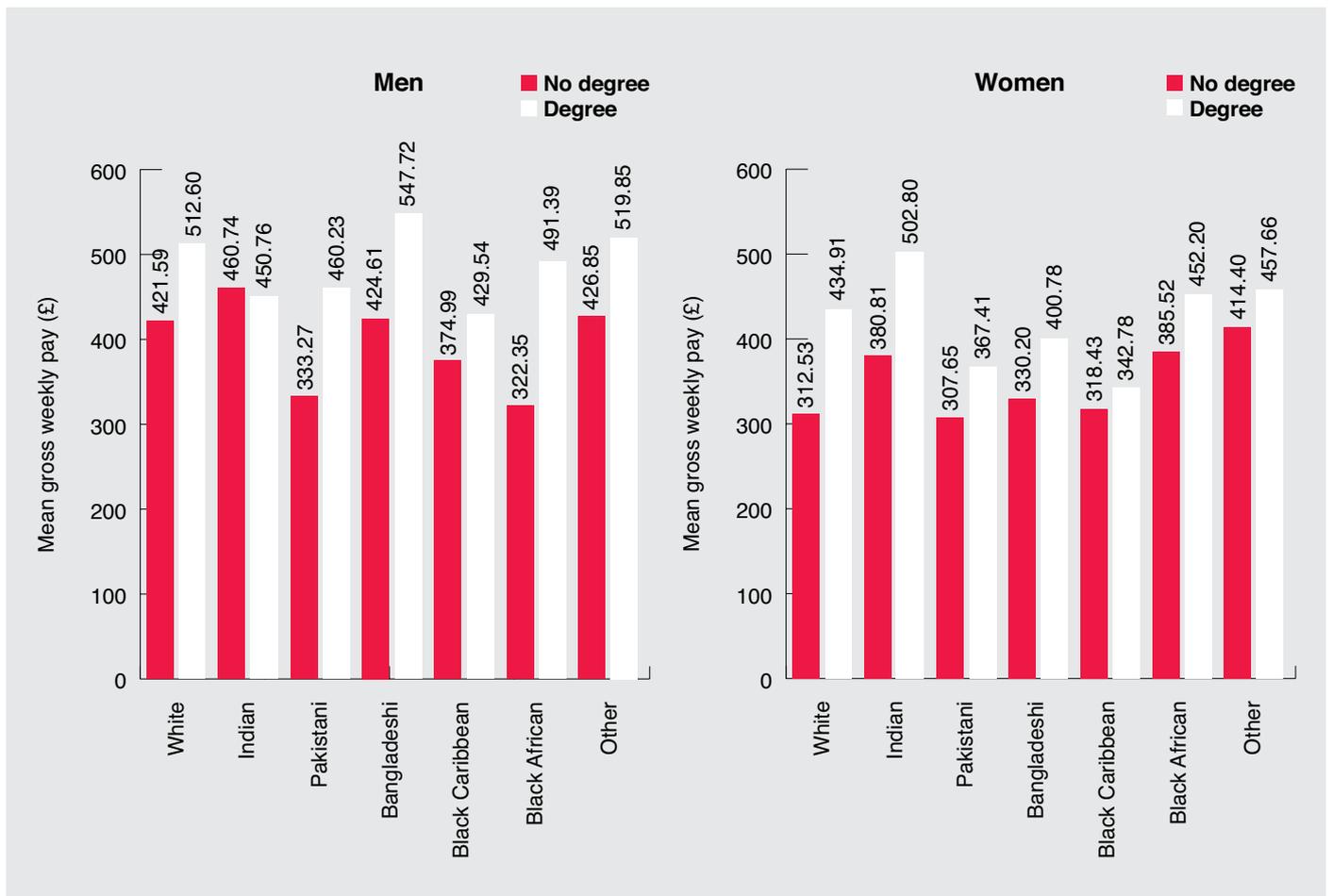
Source: Next Steps, age 25 survey. Note: for reasons of analytical sample size, we have combined mixed white and Black African with Black African and White and Black Caribbean with Black Caribbean. There were negligible numbers from the other mixed categories.

However, among those who do achieve this level of education the picture in terms of labour market success is more mixed. Figure 7 shows that the high-aspiring Indian girls do, indeed, appear to be gaining returns in the labour market. However, many of the minority groups face lower wages (significantly lower in many cases) than their White peers. All groups of degree-educated women, except Indian women have lower average pay than White women in the jobs they are doing.

However we might interpret these differences in pay, our findings on occupational preferences make it very clear that minority group children are not 'choosing' to be lower paid.



FIGURE 7:
Weekly pay by ethnic group and whether or not educated to degree level



Source: Next Steps. Notes: as for Figure 6.

Conclusions

In this report, we have shown that ambitions to succeed among minority groups are not limited to education. We have reinforced the evidence on the high educational aspirations – and to some extent educational attainment – of ethnic minority groups. We have also shown that minority groups are aiming for well-paid occupations, and in most cases more so than their White peers of the same sex. This is particularly the case for South Asian girls. Given the differences in family background and parental occupation across ethnic groups, our results would

suggest that for minority groups, the influence of family in socialising children into particular occupational expectations is not so strongly shaped by their own occupational and socio-economic position.

We observe, nevertheless, that despite these high aspirations among minority group children, they are incompletely translated into labour market outcomes. While not all pay differences are statistically significant, and some groups are doing well at age 25, the pattern is still that minority group young people are

not translating their high aspirations into commensurate occupational success. Contrary to what some have suggested, this would not appear to represent a choice among certain groups for specific occupations that command lower wages. This makes it all the more important to identify what is causing the enduring differences in labour market success. We need to consider further what is happening in relation to these young people's opportunities and options at the point of transition from education to employment.



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