MacDonald, R, King, H, Murphy, E and Gill, W (2023) The COVID-19 pandemic and youth in recent, historical perspective: more pressure, more precarity. Journal Of Youth Studies. pp. 723-740. ISSN 1469-9680

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Journal of Youth Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjys20

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**To cite this article:** Robert MacDonald, Hannah King, Emma Murphy & Wendy Gill (2023): The COVID-19 pandemic and youth in recent, historical perspective: more pressure, more precarity, Journal of Youth Studies, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2022.2163884

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2163884

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Published online: 02 Feb 2023.

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JOURNAL OF YOUTH STUDIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2163884

# The COVID-19 pandemic and youth in recent, historical perspective: more pressure, more precarity

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**ABSTRACT**

Young people have faced some of the hardest social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns. Taking a critical Youth Studies perspective, we draw on research with nearly 1000 16-to-30-year olds in North East England in order to rectify the 'structured absence' of young people's viewpoints in national media and political commentary about the pandemic. Our findings contradict narratives about young people as lockdown 'rule breakers' and demonstrated the immediate pressures that they faced vis-à-vis family and social life, well-being, and education and employment. Going further than most recent COVID-19 research – and in disagreement with the notion of a so-called COVID generation – we locate these pressures of the moment within the already hostile social-economic conditions that existed for young people in the UK pre-COVID and a discussion of the pressures to come, particularly in terms of longer-term labour market conditions and outcomes. Amidst very rapidly changing political and economic circumstances in the UK, continuing precarity for young people seems to be one certainty. We conclude by identifying some important priorities for youth research.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 26 May 2022
Accepted 5 December 2022

**KEYWORDS**
Pandemic; COVID-19; inequality; labour market; precarity

## Introduction: youth, the pandemic and inequalities

In 2020, during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, there was an explosion of expert opinion from politicians, scientists, policy makers, media pundits but young people's voices were rarely heard. They were far more likely to be talked about than talked to. This was a 'structured absence', and especially significant because the popular commentaries that *did* appear tended to fall into the well-worn binary categories of youth *in trouble* (e.g. at risk of falling behind educationally or more vulnerable to abuse in their 'locked down' homes) or *as trouble* (e.g. partying 'super-spreaders' who ignored the rules) (Griffin 1993).

These powerful ideologies of youth are not pure fiction. In the UK – which is the focus of this paper – young men were more likely than other socio-demographic groups to be fined for breaches of lockdown regulations (National Police Chief's Council 2020). Criminal

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justice system involvement does not, however, always fairly represent criminal involvement. The most obvious example is the over-policing and therefore overrepresentation of Black and racially minoritised young people in police statistics. Indeed, Black young men were twice as likely to be charged for lockdown violations than those from other ethnic groups (National Police Chief's Council 2020). It is also true that children and young people have faced greater risk because of pandemic lockdowns. Hundreds of thousands of vulnerable children were already invisible to the state according to the Children's Commissioner (2021) and being restricted to home and with limited contact with schools and youth services heightened risks (British Academy 2021). Youth workers regularly reported new cases of neglect (The Guardian 2020) and the BMJ (2020) described 'a silent pandemic' of child abuse during lockdown.

We knew, however, that there would be more to tell than this. One of the defining features of Youth Studies scholarship has been to understand the way that social inequalities are reproduced, or weakened or reshaped in new ways during this important life phase (Furlong and Cartmel 2007). We can already see hints of this in the brief discussion so far, with intergenerational inequalities shaping some of the early commentary about the pandemic. Although 'the direct morbidity and mortality risk from COVID-19 is much less for children and young people' than for older people, they were asked to carry a greater weight of sacrifice – to their education, employment and social lives – in order to protect the health of the elderly (British Academy 2021, 31). And although the government insisted that 'we are all in this together', the pandemic worsened existing inequalities, with particularly negative health outcomes for those already disadvantaged by class and ethnicity (British Academy 2021, 64). Even the headmaster of Eton College, a private school favoured by the English ruling class, remarked on the 'unfairness' of the COVID-19 pandemic: 'many of those who work in the lowest-paid roles are in fact the key to our survival' (Reuters, May 2nd 2020).

Much emergent research about young people and the pandemic has been psychological (e.g. Achdut and Refaeli 2020; Waite 2021). Our approach is based in critical Youth Studies (Kelly and Kamp 2015; MacDonald, Shildrick, and Woodman 2019), meaning for us that we: question over-generalised and normative depictions of young people and are alert to differences and inequalities in youth; decipher how 'youth' as a social, political and economic category is constructed for particular state and other purposes; examine the sociological implications of the COVID-19 crisis for social reproduction in the youth phase, particularly for transitions to adulthood. More specifically, our aims in this paper are to:

(a) describe findings from our contemporaneous research with young people in the North East of England alongside other research on the immediate impacts of lockdown and the pandemic (i.e. *Pressure Now*);
(b) situate this in a socio-historical context, acknowledging the already hostile conditions that faced young people in the UK *(Pressure Before*), and the longer-term implications for young people (*Pressure to Come*);
(c) set out, in conclusion, some imperatives for youth research.

In doing so, we question discourses about a 'COVID generation' that imply that the sources of the difficulties faced by young adults currently somehow lie in their

experiences of the pandemic, with insufficient attention paid to wider, precursory socio-economic processes. As such, we stress how the pandemic has deepened inequality and intensified precarity in youth. Firstly, though, we will describe our research design and methods.

## The 'Youth Under Lockdown' study

The research was supported by the Youth Futures Foundation and by Huddersfield and Durham Universities. The Department of Sociology at the University of Durham operates a two-week turn around for ethical approval applications; this, and the fact that the researchers were already working together on related projects, meant that we could commence research on the pandemic speedily, as its effects began to unroll. We selected North East England for largely pragmatic reasons: we needed to limit the geographic scope of the study to make it feasible and it is the place where we have long-standing connections with agencies like *the North East Youth Alliance* and *Children North East*, who we collaborated with in undertaking the research, hoping it would be of value to charities like these and therefore, ultimately, to young people themselves. Like other UK regions, it contains wide social inequalities that are relevant to the study of the pandemic but we have not undertaken a systematic comparison with other regions and we do not present our findings as being 'North East specific' (but, as we will show, our findings are similar to those from national studies).

The research had three elements to it: (i) an online survey designed to contemporaneously uncover young adult's experiences of the pandemic and lockdowns; (ii) follow-up, semi-structured interviews with survey respondents; (iii) interviews and focus groups with youth work practitioners.

***The Survey***: compared with most research on youth and the pandemic, we targeted a longer age range (14–30 years) in order to include school and college students, young workers and the unemployed, university students and graduates. Our online, 'qualitative survey' (see Braun et al. 2020) asked for participants' consent, collected socio-demographic details and then asked just one question: 'tell us about how the crisis and lockdown are affecting you, positively and negatively'. It was live between April 24th and October 19th 2020 (covering the first, main UK lockdown and the easing of some restrictions in summer 2020), and was promoted via local news media, educational institutions, youth services and direct contact with young people. 946 people responded. Sampling was not random and the material collected was qualitative commentary so it was not appropriate to attempt any substantive quantitative analysis of findings.

We were pleased to receive so many responses and that we achieved good geographic coverage across the North East, across the age range (with a skew towards younger people – around 75% were aged under 21 years), and by ethnicity (British Pakistani young people were slightly over-represented statistically). Given this age profile, it is not surprising that over 80% had qualifications below university degree level and that about 80% of the sample lived with parents or carers.

It is very difficult to gather reliable social class information in a very short, online survey so we did not attempt this. We do know, however, that a significant proportion (27%) were in the labour market (employed, self-employed or unemployed as their main activity), rather than being in education. As is often the case in online surveys (Smith

2008), the most obvious over-representation was by gender, with nearly 70% being female. Interestingly, the analysis uncovered very little difference by gender or by ethnicity in the way that young people described their experiences of the pandemic.

In respect of analysis, a random sample (n. 200) of survey responses was read by all the research team who independently suggested coding categories. These were similar and it was easy to arrive at a set of a dozen main themes for coding the survey 'data', via the NVivo software system (a similar process was used to code transcripts of the interviews with young people; see below).

***Qualitative, semi-structured interviews***: these were held, one-to-one, with a sub-sample of 35 survey respondents who, by the time of these interviews in Spring-Summer 2021, were still contactable and willing to take part. We paid attention to age, gender and ethnicity to make the sub-sample as representative as possible. As it happened, proportionately more of the interview than the survey sample were university students (aged 18–21 years). The aim was to gather more detailed accounts including how views and experiences may have changed over time. Lockdown restrictions meant that interviews were undertaken online, via Zoom or Teams, or by phone. Interviews were transcribed and a coding schema (very similar to that used for the survey) was deployed to analyse them.

***Practitioner interviews and focus groups***; these were held with youth work and social welfare practitioners. Four focus groups were undertaken with agencies in 2021, which focused on sharing understanding from across the sector, workers' own experiences and their insights on young people's experiences. Including individual interviews with practitioners, over 25 organisations across the North East took part in the research. Findings are integrated alongside material from the survey and interviews with young people, in the following pages.

## Young people and the pandemic

### *Relationships, home life and mental health:* My anxiety is the worst it's ever been.

Unsurprisingly, this being a period of lockdown, a good deal of survey commentary was about daily life in the home, and relationships with parents, siblings and friends. For many, extra time with family helped improve relationships. For others, it brought greater strain:

> I was arguing with my Mum a lot … they would last days, and I wished I could have gone and done something rather than be in the house filled with tension. Even if I went on a walk it couldn't be too long … I just wanted my own space. *(14–16 years, female, survey)*[1]

There was a widespread sense of loss. Youth sociologists have long-recognised the importance of informal socialising to this life phase (Frith 1981); even with the possibility of phone or video calls, friends and boy/girl-friends were deeply missed. Whilst lockdowns can be hard on adults who live alone, most young people do not have choice over whether they live with their romantic/sexual partners. An inter-generational inequality of lockdown policy in the UK was that they were forced by law to be separate. The research uncovered a strong sense of being *cut off* and *stuck in,* made worse by lack of privacy and space. Inequalities of domestic space rarely feature in youth sociology but the fact of garden 'haves' and 'have nots' was recognised by some respondents:

> we live in a big house with a big garden on the edge of Durham City and we have an allotment, so I think I'm quite lucky … (*17–18 years, male, survey*)

> going for a walk is especially useful – I live in a flat which has no communal gardens. My block is in an area with houses with nice gardens; it's not so nice when you can see neighbours sunbathing in their garden enjoying a BBQ or a drink. (*22–25 years, female, survey)*

Filling and structuring time is a challenge for people when they are out of work (Jahoda 1982), even when 'work' means going to school or university. Worthy of further investigation is how some were participants were able to impose routine and to spend time productively (e.g. on new exercise regimes) where others floundered. For them, sleep patterns were disrupted and life became disorienting. Boring, repetitive, 'Netflix Days' merged into each other:

> I have lost my part-time job and so everyday consists of waking up at 3pm, doing nothing but binge-watching Netflix until I go to bed at 3am. The same monotonous life, every day. Talking to barely no-one except my girlfriend and parents. Stuck, anxious with my own thoughts. (*17–18, female, survey*)

> Haze is a good word; definitely a bit of a haze. Weird things, like not being able to know which day it is, or like struggling to get what month or week it is. When I try to pinpoint when something happened in the past I'd say, like, 'oh, it's a week ago' but it's actually three months ago. *(14–16 years, male, interview)*

According to the British Academy's review of evidence (2021, 64), the pandemic generated 'largely unpredicted' but now widely reported 'negative impacts on mental health' for young people, stemming from family tensions, fears about the virus, isolation and worries about future prospects. Young people fared worse than other age groups, with rates of probable mental health disorders rising to one in six of those five to 16 years in England, compared with one in nine, three years earlier (NHS 2020). Girls, those from low-income families, or with pre-existing mental health problems or SEND had the worst outcomes (Prince's Trust and the Education Policy Institute 2021). In line with other research, the pandemic's negative psychological impact was the largest, single theme in our survey:

> [It] has had a shocking effect on my already deteriorating mental state … quite depressed the majority of the time … suicidal thoughts. Being essentially locked in the house leaves me alone [and] … significantly more anxious and depressed. *(17–18 years, female, survey)*

There was a widespread sense of mental 'ill-being'; respondents talked about increased 'anxiety', 'stress', 'depression' and 'worry' and a greater propensity to 'feel low', or to have 'panic attacks' or 'negative thoughts'. Despite this, few survey responses were about contacts with health, welfare or youth services. Local practitioners also saw a crisis in youth mental health and told us how difficult it had been to operate effectively during the pandemic, despite their best efforts, a particular worry being those young people who were invisible to services but 'only just getting by'.

## *Education: 'I am anxious this will hold me back'*

Worsened mental health has also been linked to the 'relentless uncertainty' of the pandemic (Waite 2021), particularly in relation to disrupted regimes of learning and

qualification. Participants worried about making normal educational transitions from GCSE to A-levels (normally at age 16 in the UK) and from A-level to university (typically at 18 years) (National Audit Office 2021) and felt the loss of never-to-be-repeated 'cultural milestones' (end of term parties, leaving 'dos', going off to university):

> We had what was meant to be a 'virtual [degree] graduation ceremony', but it was just, like, videos that lecturers recorded with them saying things … but, like, none of our names or anything. I got my degree certificate through the post … I have still not ever celebrated it properly. *(19–21 years, female, interview)*

During the pandemic, distractions and declining motivation meant that school work could take much longer at home:

> My motivation was completely shattered … I didn't really regain it 'til after exams … After the lockdowns, I don't know what happened really … it is hard to uphold your motivation when you're like in a bit of an echo chamber, really, just have yourself to bounce off of. (*14–16 years, male, interview*)

Social class and poverty are important here; the pandemic magnified the negative effect of poverty on education, with many low-income families struggling to provide resources necessary for their children's learning (Children North East and Child Poverty Action Group 2020). Some pupils 'lost half a year or more against normal progress' with pupils at private schools being 'twice as likely as those at state schools to get regular online teaching' (IFS 2021a). The government's tutoring scheme to help pupils 'catch up' did not reach the most disadvantaged children (the National Audit Office 2021). Our research pointed to some of these inequalities:

> … my education has dramatically declined. I barely have contact with the school. Lots of teachers don't reply to emails. We are just given work-sheets to complete … I have no-one to contact if I'm struggling … this has caused a lot of stress. (*14–16 years*, *male, survey*)

> School is stressful as we are not getting much help from teachers. We aren't allowed to do Zoom calls or anything. My education is suffering a lot. (*17–18 years, female, survey*)

The pandemic exacerbated 'the digital divide' (North East LEP 2021). Participants reported competition for hardware (e.g. the family laptop), for Wi-Fi bandwidth, and for physical space to work when parents and siblings were all working from home. Rarely discussed in extant research on youth and the pandemic is the fact that, of course, some young adults are parents themselves. Those in our research juggled care for their children, home learning, domestic work and employment. Inequalities could reflect family cultural capital: 'I have so much work piling up – but I don't understand some of it! There's no-one I can ask for help. Neither of my parents did GCSEs' (*14–16 years, female*).

## *Employment: 'It's frightening how quickly I was out of work'*

The 'COVID-19 recession' was 'the most severe and widespread jobs crisis faced by young people during the new millennium' (ILO 2021, 13). Falls in employment for young people were five times greater than for adults (ILO 2021, 4). In the UK and globally, young adults are overrepresented in occupational sectors (e.g. retail and hospitality) that faced much higher rates of redundancy, job loss and furloughing[2] (Resolution Foundation 2020a). This affected one-third of those UK 18–24-year olds who are not full-time students, and

young people accounted for nearly two-thirds of all jobs lost (Resolution Foundation 2020a), with predictable regional variations in youth unemployment rates (under ten per cent in the South East and nearly 17 per cent in the North East; ONS 2021a).

Young workers are more likely than others to do non-standard work in the 'gig economy' (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu 2019) and this group faced even higher rates of furloughing and job loss (around two-fifths of them) (Resolution Foundation 2020a). Non-standard employment also carries a higher risk of income insecurity. If a twenty-year-old worker is contracted for, say, ten hours per week but often works 'flexibly' for twenty-hours, furlough 'pay' (if eligible) amounted to only 80 per cent of ten hours per week. Effectively, paid time would reduce from twenty to eight hours per week.

The financial costs of the pandemic impacted on respondents. One male university student said: 'I still have to pay bills and rent for a uni house that I'm no longer living in and I still pay tuition fees even though I've barely had any teaching – so my finances are very limited and concerning'. Many of the self-employed missed out on government support during the pandemic and struggled to keep afloat (British Academy 2021); this was true of some of our self-employed respondents:

I try to get some work done, but I'm very directionless because all of my commissions have been dropped due to the virus. I haven't been self-employed long enough for government grants, so I'm just trying to make up work that will get me money (*22–25 years, Other, interview*).

Many of our participants had jobs in the hospitality or retail sectors and a significant proportion of these had lost jobs or been furloughed – they appreciated the temporary safety but worried about the future: 'it has made me think about possibly changing my career path. It's frightening how quickly I was out of work. I wouldn't want the same experience again' (*19–21 years, female, interview*).

This COVID-related recession was unusually harsh for young people because – unlike other recessions – their employment *and* education were simultaneously disrupted, because lockdown measures curtailed new job search for the unemployed, and because there was heavy demand from all age groups for the 'entry-level' jobs typically taken by young workers (ILO 2021). A survey of recruitment agencies in summer 2020 found that jobs that 'normally would receive a handful of applicants were receiving thousands', with one North East warehouse job, for example, getting 2932 applications (The Independent, August 2020). This is partly explained by the impact of the recession on higher skilled workers: graduate recruitment dropped by nearly 11 per cent in 2020, the largest decrease since 2009 (High Fliers Research 2021).

Interviewees also raised some of the less direct impacts on their employment trajectories. These included: the fears of 'stalling' with temporary 'less-than-desirable' jobs ending up as their long-term employment; of the impact on careers of lost opportunities for placements and internships; and of the increased role of unpaid voluntary work in making their CV's competitive:

> My little brother … graduated and he can't find a job. No graduate ones. He worked at Sainsbury's [supermarket] for six months and now he's working in a call centre, and he's got a master's degree in aerospace engineering. You know, it's crazy how you kind of plan for the future and you think, 'oh this is a job that will have a lot of future prospects' and then something like this happens. *(26–30 years, male, interview)*

Absent from much media commentary and research to date is the fact that many young adults *continued* in jobs during lockdown because they were 'key-workers' (e.g. in our research, as nurses, teaching assistants, care workers, delivery drivers, shop assistants). There is no national data on young adults' employment as key workers but this is another finding that counters the dominant 'youth as trouble' narrative associated with the pandemic:

> A lot of people tarnish my generation for being inconsiderate and, like, going out and stuff but I don't think that was necessarily fair. Especially not when I know that so many teenagers are working on COVID wards. It's not just middle-aged people that work for the NHS, there's a lot of us young people that do as well. *(19–21 years, female, interview)*

Being a key worker fed fears that they might pass the virus to their parents or grandparents. This helped explain the general support for lockdown restrictions; again, *contra* media narratives about 'irresponsible youth' and intergenerational strife. This insecurity extended to worries about family income, where parents had lost jobs or been furloughed: there were examples of young adults drawing on their wages or student loans to support family finances.

In sum, disruptions to education, employment, family and social life were strongly felt by our participants, amounting to a widespread sense of uncertainty and, for many, psychological ill-being. Youth workers told us how even those in their early teens were worried about the impact of the pandemic on their long-term education and job prospects.

As we will make clear, our argument is that this sense of uncertainty and insecurity should *not* be understood simply as products of the pandemic. We challenge currently popular but unhelpful labelling of young people as a 'COVID generation' (e.g. CNN 2021; European Commission 2022) because this implies that the sources of their difficulties somehow lie in or are restricted to their experiences of the pandemic. Rather, by placing young people's experiences in historical context – as we do in the next section – we are able to see how insecurity and uncertainty were pre-existing facets of the youth condition in the UK that were further exacerbated by the pandemic and associated lockdowns.

## Pressure before, pressure now, pressure to come: youth in recent, historical context

The early decades of the twenty-first century were unpropitious times to be young in the UK (and more widely). Influential commentators *defined* the youth experience as one of precarity (Standing 2011; Bessant, Watts, and Farthing 2017). Youth unemployment had begun to rise in 2004 (Petrongolo and Van Reenen 2011), even before the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2007/8, which itself ushered in deep recession and far-reaching, UK government austerity policies that combined to drastically reduce opportunities for young people (Intergenerational Foundation 2015). Welfare benefits were reduced in number, lessened in value and subjected to greater compulsion and sanctioning (Watts 2014). The already disadvantaged were disadvantaged further; inequalities deepened (BMA 2016). Like in the high unemployment days of the early 1980s, commentators once again talked of 'a lost generation' (The Guardian 2020).

When they did find jobs, long-term wage stagnation, widespread *under*employment and a less protective welfare state meant that young adults often faced rising levels of poverty and deprivation – yet the problem of 'youth poverty' received very little policy attention (Fahmy 2017). UK governments repeated the mantra that 'work is the best route out of poverty' but rates of 'in-work poverty' rose during this period (JRF 2022) and for socially or educationally disadvantaged young adults the labour market often consisted of 'low-skilled, low-paid jobs, very often on short-term contracts, offering temporary and/or zero hours work and with few opportunities for progression' which can 'lead into precarious and unpredictable working lives with poor prospects' (ESRC 2017, 34). Insecurity proliferated beyond the labour market. An unwelcoming housing market with prohibitive material barriers, and the apparent impossibility of home ownership, gave rise to the label 'Generation Rent' (Cribb, Hood, and Hoyle 2019). Together, these problems have been linked to a youth mental health crisis (e.g. Parkin et al. 2019) that was in train before the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

The UK has long-lacked a comprehensive youth policy agenda (Coles 2002; King 2016). Successive governments have, though, sought to reduce the proportion of young people who are 'not in education, employment and training' (NEET) and to increase participation in higher education (now accounting for close to half the age cohort). With substantial student debt, an unequal, socially stratified university system and the apparent oversupply of graduates to the labour market, it is debateable whether massified higher education secures prosperous futures for all students (see MacDonald 2022). Although well-known socio-economic inequalities shape youth transitions (France and Roberts 2017), these problems affect more than the already disadvantaged (Williams et al. 2021). The UK Government acknowledges this to be the first generation likely to experience downward social mobility compared with their parents' generation (Roberts 2011), and intergenerational divides are significant politically (e.g. young voters were very heavily skewed towards 'remain' in the EU referendum; Sloam and Henn 2019).

In sum, even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, *all* young adults in the UK faced exceptional changes in the context and nature of youth transitions, compared with previous generations. Because of class and other inequalities, some young people had it worse than others. As we have noted, the COVID-19 crisis exacerbated these inequalities – and those between generations (e.g. Côté 2014; GNPRYT 2020) – not least by further disrupting 'normal' educational and labour market pathways.

Going further, we argue that if we are properly to grasp the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people, it is not only important to take stock of the already existing pressures that they faced but also to seek to map out the likely pressures to come. As one young woman put it: 'this is going to be in our lives for such a long time' (*22–25 years, female, survey*).

The concept of 'bounded agency' is helpful here, reminding us how pressures of the present build on top of pressures before and shape pressures to come. As Evans et al explain (2001, 25, our emphasis): 'the metaphor of social actors moving in a social landscape … [sees] agency as being both temporally embedded and bounded, *influenced in the chances of the present moment by past experiences and the sense of future possibilities*'. A good example of this relates to mental health. Mental ill-health was already rising for young people prior to the pandemic (John 2021) and those with previous mental health problems had the worst psychological experience of lockdown (The British

Academy 2021). We also know that negative experiences now (e.g. gaps in educational achievement, exposure to domestic violence) 'store up problems for the future' and are 'associated with later onset of mental health problems' (British Academy 2021, 34–35).

### *Scarring and inequality*

As well as psychological harm, there is also the threat of long-term economic 'scarring'. The enormous social and economic effects of the pandemic mean more than ever that the youth phase – and young people's engagement with the economy – might act as an indicator of wider social change (MacDonald, Shildrick, and Woodman 2019). Speaking of its global significance, Palmer and Small (2021) argue that 'the scale and duration of health and economic impacts [of the COVID-19 pandemic] differentiate it from … crises such as Ebola and the Great Recession' and the ILO have remarked that this was a 'far deeper and more global downturn than witnessed in 2009' (2021, 2). Indeed, The UK economy suffered its biggest decline in 300 years; a drop of 9.9% (The Financial Times 2021).

Thus, in 2020, young people in the UK encountered a collapsing labour market. We know that, typically, recessions hit young people hard for several reasons: those seeking their first jobs confront a tightening labour market; young workers are usually cheaper to fire or make redundant than older ones; they are less likely to have the protections of Trade Union membership; they may not have yet 'earned' time-related employment rights; they may not have yet acquired the competencies that employers value. Young workers are also more likely to be in less regulated, less protected labour market sectors, and also to be in less secure forms of non-standard employment (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu 2019).

Conditions like these run the risk of the long-term scarring of young workers. Evidence from previous recessions has shown that early and repeated spells of unemployment can damage prospects; i.e. make young people prone to greater risk of unemployment or poor-quality employment (Schwandt and von Wachter 2019). As the ILO notes (2021, 14), however, the impact of the COVID-19 recession on young people's educational pathways and labour market engagement was more severe than previous ones, and those that had the 'bad fortune of graduating from school or college during 2020 recession' are therefore likely to face more severe and long-lasting effects as well. Less often noted is the fact that some young workers, in their mid to late twenties, will have faced the double misfortune of the post-GFC 2008 recession *and* the COVID-19 recession (Bosley et al. 2020).

Applying econometric modelling based on data from that 2008 recession, the Resolution Foundation (2020b, 4) suggest that 'the unique nature' of the pandemic-related economic crisis meant that young adults faced the risk of significant scarring in terms of future employment and pay. They have predicted post-crisis, in three years' time, that employment rates will have fallen for *all* young adults: graduates will have 13 per cent lower rates with a massive drop of 37 per cent for low-skilled workers (and 27 per cent for those with medium levels of skill). The British Academy (2021, 82) also points to long-term 'significant adverse effects', including depressing an individual's earning for up to 10 years. Because young people 'will enter work knowing less' – owing to lost schooling – they 'will earn less', possibly an average life-time loss of around £40,000

(IFS 2021a). Indeed, the UK government's 'Education Recovery Commissioner' resigned his post because the funds set aside for this task were, in his view, 'feeble' compared with the 'scale of the shock' that 'will go with' young people across their lives (The Guardian 2021a).

Reflecting current debates in Youth Studies (e.g. Woodman and Wyn 2015), the pandemic raises questions about inequalities *between young people* as well as *between generations*. In terms of the latter, the UK's Centre for Economic Performance (2020) has warned of a 'dark age of declining social mobility … because of rising economic and educational inequalities … Without policy action to counter the threat, unprecedented economic and education shocks could inflict long-term scarring effects, damaging future life prospects for young people'. The *Youth Futures Foundation* also situates young people's current prospects in the longer perspective of '*generational* progress grinding to a halt' (Williams et al. 2021, 1, our emphasis).

In terms of *intra*-generational inequalities, the IFS (2021a) points to the huge social disparities in the effects of the pandemic. It added to the pressures on low-income families and added to inequalities in youth experience (CPAG 2020). The government's furlough scheme helped to protect young workers as a whole and to limit rises in youth unemployment (IFS 2021b). However, class inequality shaped the ability of families to offer support – such as accommodation to students 'returned home' from university, food, warmth, IT facilities – so young people from more financially well-off families will have been shielded from the effects of the pandemic to a greater extent than those from less well-off families. As one of young man in our survey put it: 'thank goodness my parents are fine with waiving rent for now because I cannot make any money!' (*19–21 years, male*).

We had, then, a pandemic recession that was particularly disadvantageous for young people – and even more disadvantageous for those who *already* carried the social class disadvantage of lower levels of education and qualification, lower individual and family income and wealth, less spacious and more crowded housing, fewer material resources in the home, no access to a garden and so on.

## Uncertainty and complexity in the youth labour market: 'living in interesting times'[3]

Mapping contemporaneously the impact of the pandemic and predicting the effects for young people has been made difficult not just by the speed in change of waves of the virus but also by the twists and turns in government policy (e.g. in terms of lockdowns) and by rapidly shifting labour market conditions (e.g. rates of un/employment). To give an example, in the period that we have been working on this paper, in the UK we have had the whole-scale lifting of restrictions on so-called Freedom Day (19th July 2021), followed – less than six months later – by the hasty reintroduction of wide preventative measures to cope with exponentially rising infection rates that threatened to overwhelm public health systems (The Guardian 2021c). Nevertheless, and despite fears to the contrary, by the end of 2021 the UK was having a strong economic recovery.

In early summer 2022, when we first submitted this paper to *Journal of Youth Studies*, the threat of the pandemic was receding (and, rightly or wrongly, we shifted to using the past tense in respect of it) and all restrictions were again lifted, but because of a mix of

domestic and international factors the UK faced renewed economic uncertainty with spiralling inflation and a new 'cost-of-living crisis'.

Between then and the submission of this revised paper (in November 2022), we have seen the resignation of two British Prime Ministers, a politically-triggered and catastrophic financial collapse of the UK economy on world markets, the announcement of prospective new austerity cuts to public spending, and – as we write – warnings from the Bank of England that the country now faces the longest recession on record, with steeply rising unemployment on the horizon (BBC 2022). We are certainly 'living in interesting times'. As one anonymous reviewer of this paper put it, 'the future looks very different now from the end of 2021 … it seems hazardous to guess how the future will look at the end of 2023'. This is sage advice. Above, we have stressed the probability of continuing inequality in the effects of the pandemic and the likelihood of longer-term labour market scarring for young adults. We refrain from further prediction beyond this.

It is perhaps useful, though, to finish this section with a brief note on the *complexities* that can be observed – during the period of the pandemic, 2020–2022 – in patterns of youth transition to the labour market in the UK. For instance, we did *not* witness the widely predicted spike in youth unemployment in Autumn 2021 when government furlough schemes came to an end. Indeed, partly because of the strength of economic recovery, there were record levels of job vacancies and subsequent falling youth unemployment (ONS 2021b). Economic recovery is only part of the explanation. There are complex dynamics at play between youth unemployment, education and employment. For instance, as well as low unemployment 'post-pandemic' we *also* see lower overall employment rates and higher rates of economic inactivity (compared with pre-pandemic levels) (House of Commons Library 2021b). This is associated with an acceleration in the pre-pandemic trend towards post-16 educational participation and has resulted in 'a significant contraction in the size of the youth labour market', with fewer young people in jobs and 'unprecedented numbers of young people staying in or moving into full-time education' (a rate of 47% compared with 43% pre-crisis) (Williams et al. 2021, 2; Goulden 2021). In other words, the difficulty UK employers have had lately in recruiting young workers has partly been driven by sizeable increases in educational participation (Wilson 2021). Additionally, one in twelve of all young people in the UK are 'economically inactive' (i.e. not in education nor looking for work, with many of these young people having health problems, disabilities or caring responsibilities.). This is a figure that has persisted over decades, with slight rises during the pandemic (Resolution Foundation 2022c). At the other end of the age range, there has been even more substantial rises in economic inactivity 'post-pandemic' for older workers, due to early retirement and ill-health (ONS 2022). Together these complex trends have given rise to the 'tightest jobs market since the 1960s' (Wilson 2021).

Optimistic labour market headlines (in Autumn 2021) about low youth unemployment and booming job vacancies also masked structural inequalities in the labour market for young people (Williams et al. 2021). For instance, national rates hide regional disparities in worklessness, with the North East continuing to have disproportionately high rates of unemployment and relatively less help from government support schemes. For example, despite claims that 250,000 jobs would be created by the government's pandemic-related 'Kickstart' scheme, after six months only 12,000 had been, with less than 500 of these in the North East – a region with one of the greatest needs, but the lowest success (The

Guardian 2021b). Even with record levels of job vacancies (FE News 2022), young people face the familiar, pre-pandemic problem of finding *good* jobs (Work Foundation 2021). Many of the reported vacancies are low-paid (The Guardian 2021d) and recently the Resolution Foundation (2022c) has found that one-third of young adults who lost jobs during lockdown had since returned to work on insecure contracts.

## Summary and conclusion: future research

Our research had limitations, two of which are that the survey was not statistically representative of young people in North East England and that we were unable to analyse research material by the social class of participants. Nevertheless, the absolute number of respondents, and their socio-demographic spread, suggests that it was valuable in getting a wide-ranging view of the pandemic from young people (and youth workers) across the North East. There was strong consensus amongst our participants and what they said tallied with more rigorous, statistically representative national surveys (e.g. vis-à-vis negative mental effects; British Academy 2021).

The ILO says that 'the crisis has been multidimensional in its impacts on young people' (2021, 14). This has been borne out by our research in North East England. Less prone to its health risks than older people, we found, nonetheless, that: the pandemic and lockdown (s) impacted heavily on young people's day-to-day lives and their relationships; the 'COVID recession' was unusually harsh for young people because their employment and education were simultaneously disrupted and young people faced some of the toughest labour market effects; they often expressed a sense of emotional and psychological 'ill-being' and worried about the future; and young people's experiences sometimes reflected class inequalities and punctured popular stereotypes.

One motivation for our research was the 'structured absence' of young people's views in the early commentary about the pandemic. Since then much research has been published, predominantly with a psychological-focus. Few studies have adopted the sociological, critical Youth Studies perspective that we have. For us, it was important to locate young people's experiences of 'the here and now' of the pandemic – as important as that is – within a longer perspective on the changing situation of youth in the UK. We have argued that the COVID-19 crisis accelerated disruption and *added* to the mounting economic and social pressures young people already faced in the first two decades of the twenty-first century making transitions to adulthood even more precarious.

During our work on this project and paper over the past two years there have been extraordinarily rapid and seismic socio-economic and political changes in the UK. Trying to lift above the complexity and unpredictability, we can be certain, at least, that the pandemic has heightened the precarity in young people's lives and futures. One very recent study of 2000 young people in the UK, by the Prince's Trust (2022), concludes exactly this. More than a third of the sample felt their 'life was spiralling out of control' and over 60% were scared about their generation's future, having lived through the pandemic only to be hit by a new 'cost-of-living crisis'.

During the pandemic middle-aged social commentators and politicians talked of 'getting back to normal' in 'a post-COVID world'. This seemed to be ignorant of the deep problems that were *already* facing young people before the pandemic. Indeed, if 'getting back to normal' means a return to conditions pre-Covid, then this returns

young people to a set of circumstances where the standard education, employment and housing possibilities that framed the transitions to adulthood of the post-war 'Baby Boomer generation' (the circumstances perhaps *imagined* by political leaders and social commentators) had already become largely unobtainable for the majority. Beck's *The Risk Society* (1992) was influential in Youth Studies because it seemed to capture a new condition of unpredictability, where traditional social scripts had less purchase for young people and where standardised transitions to adulthood began to dissipate. In other words, the current generation of young people have simply never, *en masse*, had the opportunity to establish the sort of 'normality' experienced by earlier generations. Instead, their 'normality' has been one of flux, uncertainty and disappearing opportunity.

Our argument, then, is that if we are to weigh up the significance of the pandemic for young people it is necessary to look *backwards*, pre-pandemic, and to look *forward* to the futures that they will face and how these may have been altered by COVID-19 and associated lockdowns. Critical here is the structure of labour market opportunities that 'scaffold' youth transitions to adulthood. Cogent evidence from national and international research points to coming heavy pressures, including the likely scarring effects of the loss of education, of employment, of earnings and of labour market experience. It is difficult to conclude other than that this scarring is likely to add to intergenerational inequalities, increase youth precarity and sharpen inequalities between young people.

Given this, what might be some of the priorities for youth research?

There is an obvious need to track outcomes for young people (e.g. vis-à-vis mental health and the labour market), including the effects of social policy decisions and interventions. Regarding the core stuff of the sociology of youth transitions, it would also be beneficial to 'get behind' the current, complex patterns of unemployment, employment, economic inactivity and educational participation in order to properly understand – from young people's perspective – their 'bounded agency' and decisions they make, in the light of experience, when faced with this 'post-pandemic' opportunity structure and the sorts of experiences and outcomes they lead to.

Next, we are still to fully comprehend the unequal experience and outcomes of the pandemic and how these intertwine with extensive, pre-existing inequalities. This would be prime territory in which to progress contemporary theory in Youth Studies about the balance of *inter*-generational versus *intra*-generational inequalities. Here the social policy concept of 'the welfare mix' could be useful. Antonucci (2016) has theorised youth inequalities in terms of the differential resources that are available from the labour market (e.g. wages), the family (e.g. extended care) and the state (e.g. social welfare benefits), i.e. 'the welfare mix'. In broad terms, during the pandemic it would appear that many young adults in the UK had their labour market income reduced or cut altogether. And for many, state welfare assistance increased (via the furlough scheme and a rise in the value of welfare payments); an unusual and temporary reverse to the trend of the previous 'austerity decade'. Again, for many but not all, families have been an important 'back stop'. We know that there will be many inequalities here in the resources available to young people (CPAG 2020; University of Bristol 2021) but we do not yet know the complete shape, dimensions, dynamics and experience of these, nor – critically – how they might map onto the longer-term social welfare of young people in the UK (Fahmy et al. 2020). There will be others too but these would all seem to be important questions for youth research.

## Notes

1. Because of the large numbers involved in the survey and interviews, we have not suggested pseudonyms for participants and present only their self-defined gender and age categories and whether a survey or interview participant.
2. A government scheme to keep people in employment even if not working, and paid a subsidised wage of 80% of normal pay.
3. Apocryphally, 'may you live in interesting times' is a traditional Chinese curse, the implication being that living in more mundane times of peace and stability is a preferred human condition.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by The Youth Futures Foundation.

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