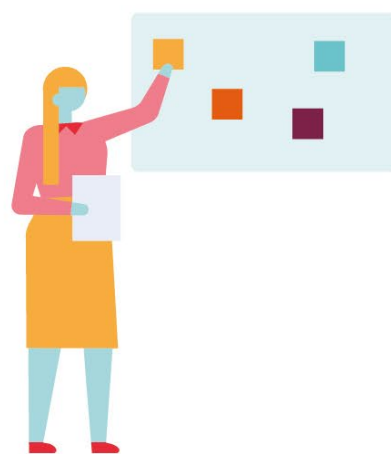# youth futures
FOUNDATION

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Young People

Pressure Before, Pressure Now and Pressure to Come

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The COVID-19 Pandemic and Young People

- Youth Futures Foundation is an independent, not-for-profit organisation established with a £90m endowment from the Reclaim Fund to improve employment outcomes for young people from marginalised backgrounds. Our aim is to narrow employment gaps by identifying what works and why, investing in evidence generation and innovation, and igniting a movement for change

- The 'Youth Under Lockdown' research project was undertaken by the Universities of Durham and Huddersfield. Using an online survey and interviews with young people and youth practitioners, it aimed to chart young adults' experiences of the pandemic and of lockdown. It was carried out in collaboration with Children North East and the North East Youth Alliance.

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The COVID-19 Pandemic and Young People

Contents

About the research team/evaluator

The project was undertaken by researchers from Durham University (Prof Emma Murphy, Dr Hannah King, Wendy Gill) and the University of Huddersfield (Prof Robert MacDonald).

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Executive summary

Aims and research design

From March 2020, and 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. What was said fell into well-worn tropes that represented young people as powerless victims (e.g. at risk of falling behind educationally) or trouble-some 'super-spreaders' who partied on, ignoring the lockdown rules. This exclusion of young people from discussions about the pandemic was the main driver for this research.

The **aims** of this report are to:

- **present the views and experiences that young people had of the pandemic and lockdowns** (from our research conducted contemporaneously in the North East of England and from other recent studies);

- situate this discussion in **a longer-term, socio-historical context** that acknowledges the preceding, already hostile conditions that faced young people in the UK in the early decades of the 21st century;

- identify some of the future **implications of the pandemic** and pressures to come for young people, particularly in respect of the labour market;

- set out some imperatives for **future youth research and youth policy**.

In contrast to most of the existing research on young people and the pandemic, our perspective has been sociologically not psychologically oriented. More specifically, we adopt a critical Youth Studies perspective that questions dominant and normative narratives about 'youth', that pays attention to inequalities between young people and between generations, and that has a strong focus on young people's transitions to adulthood and engagement with the labour market.

Our study, which commenced in April 2020, had three main components:

- an **online survey with nearly one thousand young people** (aged 14 to 30 years) from North East England;
- **follow-up, qualitative interviews with thirty-five young people** (drawn from the survey respondents);
- **interviews and focus group discussions with practitioners** who work with young people.

Findings

Less prone to its health risks than older people, young people nonetheless have experienced significant hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in respect of disruption to their education, their transitions to the labour market and their employment. This has been confirmed by numerous studies in the UK and more widely. The ILO (2021: 14) notes that 'the crisis has been multidimensional in its impacts on young people' and this is what our research found as well. Our **six main findings** are:

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Young People

- The **pandemic and lockdown(s) impacted heavily on young people's day to day lives and their relationships with family, friends and partners.** Some had improved relationships and fostered new hobbies. Others reported increased pressure and household strain, often connected to lack of space, and they missed friends and girl/boyfriends. Some felt they were floundering; filling and structuring time in endless 'Netflix Days' was a challenge.

- **Education had been severely disrupted.** People worried that their education and qualifications would not be good enough. Uncertainty over the future and the sense they were missing important educational and other milestones and cultural rites of passage ('leaving dos', graduation ceremonies, gap years, 18th birthday parties) fed this anxiety.

- **Young people have faced some of the toughest labour market effects of the pandemic.** Our participants described losing jobs and losing income and sometimes not being eligible for government support (such as the furlough scheme); being able to 'fall back' on family support was important. Regardless of whether they were in work or in education, young people expressed worry and insecurity about their future prospects. The 'COVID recession' was unusually harsh for young people because their employment and education were simultaneously disrupted.

- Very often **young people expressed a sense of emotional and psychological 'ill-being'**; this was the most common single theme to emerge from the survey, and is now a widely reported outcome of the pandemic. It was tied to the pressures they felt being 'stuck in' and 'cut off' at home, to the disruptions to their education and employment and to their sense of uncertainty about the future.

- **Young adults' experiences punctured popular stereotypes.** For example, reflecting a sense of collective social responsibility and a concern to protect loved ones from the risks of the virus, they expressed strong support for lockdown regulations and felt dismayed by the negative way their generation was often portrayed in the media. A second example, is that some of our sample were 'key workers' (e.g. nurses, teachers, delivery drivers, shop workers) countering negative stereotypes often associated with 'youth' during the pandemic.

- The research pointed to **class inequalities in young people's experiences**, tallying with other studies. The quality of educational support was an example and, because of their different levels of material and other resources, some families were more able to support young people than others. Commonly reported examples related to computer and Wi-Fi access and space to work or for privacy. Access to gardens and outside space is an under-reported example of youth inequality brought to light by the pandemic.

The bigger picture

Other studies have now reported some similar findings of the immediate effects of the pandemic on young people, which helps confirm these from our qualitative study in North East England. Few studies have, however, sought to locate young people's experiences of the pandemic within a longer historical and sociological context. Here, the **sociological concept of 'bounded agency' reminds us that, for young people, pressures now (during the pandemic) build on top of pressures before**

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Young People

(in the early years of the 21st century) and shape pressures to come, in terms of the future prospects for young people.

A good example of this relates to mental health. Prior to the pandemic there were already rising rates of anxiety, self-harm and suicidal behaviour amongst young people. Young people with previous mental health problems had the worst psychological experience of lockdown. With rising rates of unemployment, labour market precarity, poverty and deprivation, an out-of-reach housing market, rising university tuition fees, widespread underemployment, austerity cuts to youth services and welfare entitlements, **the early decades of the 21st century were unpropitious times to be young.**

The **pandemic has accelerated and added to the already hostile conditions that young people faced.**

It is difficult to predict the future. Research from different countries and previous recessions points to **the dangers of 'scarring' for young people**, negatively impacting in the long term on their chances of getting and keeping good jobs and on their levels of pay. This remains a concern even if some of the worst immediate scenarios for young people in the UK vis-à-vis unemployment have not, to date, come about. This is partly thanks to the government's furlough scheme, partly because of the 'bounce back' of the national economy in late 2021/ early 2022, and partly because the pandemic has encouraged greater levels of educational participation (reducing the numbers of people looking for jobs). **Headline labour market statistics are relatively positive but reflect a complicated, dynamic picture** that masks worries about economic inactivity, about the quality of jobs available and about inequalities between young people, as well as about the longer-term trend of declining social mobility for this generation.

Future youth research and policy

Priorities for research include:

- **Tracking the outcomes of the pandemic** (e.g. in respect of mental health and labour market scarring) particularly in relation to the already hostile conditions young adults faced;
- Understanding the complexity in current patterns of unemployment, employment, economic inactivity and educational participation **from young people's perspectives**.
- Investigating more fully the **unequal experience of the pandemic and its outcomes – between the generations and between young adults**. The social policy concept of 'the welfare mix' could be useful here.

Priorities for social policy include:

- Interventions to **limit the future negative consequences** and labour market 'scarring' for young adults, particularly those regarded as 'vulnerable', with the **promotion of secure good quality jobs** as a central plank;
- Actions to **address existing and predicted inter- and intra-generational inequalities** in young people's experiences and prospects;

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Young People

- A more **concerted and comprehensive UK youth policy agenda** to remedy the enormous difficulties many young people have in achieving secure and rewarding education, employment and housing transitions and which puts **the social welfare of all young adults at its hear.**

Introduction

Youth, the pandemic and inequalities

From March 2020, and 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. Young people were far more likely to be talked about than talked to. For example, there was much discussion about how best to deal with disrupted school examinations in summer 2020 but very little consultation with young people. Their questions were excluded from the daily Government press conferences (Lawes, 2021). This was a 'structured absence', and especially significant because the popular commentaries that did appear tended to fall into well-worn categories (Griffin, 1993).

Young people were represented as being in trouble (e.g. at risk of falling behind educationally or more vulnerable to violence or abuse in their 'locked down' homes) or as trouble (e.g. 'super-spreaders' who partied on, ignoring the lockdown rules). 'In trouble'/ 'as trouble', in need of care / in need of control are age-old and dominant ideologies of 'youth' across many countries (MacDonald and King, 2021). The exclusion of young people from discussions about the pandemic was the main driver for this research.

We are not suggesting that these powerful ideologies of youth 'as trouble' or 'in trouble' are pure fiction. 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 justice system involvement does not, however, always fairly represent criminal involvement. The most obvious example is the over-policing and therefore overrepresentation of BAME young people in police statistics. Indeed, BAME young men were twice as likely to be charged for lockdown violations compared with non-BAME young men (National Police Chief's Council, 2020). It is also true that children and young people have faced greater social 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 has heightened risks (British Academy, 2021). Youth workers regularly had to report new cases of neglect (The Guardian, 2020) and the BMJ (2020) describes 'a silent pandemic' of child abuse during lockdown.

So, there is no denying that stories of young people breaking lockdown restrictions or of them being more vulnerable during the crisis have some purchase. We knew, though, that there would be more to it than this. One of the defining features of UK Youth Studies 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 potential 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 'the measures taken in response to the pandemic have substantially impacted this group in other ways' (British Academy, 2021: 31). They have been asked to make significant sacrifices in respect of their education, employment and social lives – in order to protect the health of the elderly. We discuss this in the next section.

Despite government efforts to convince us that 'we are all in this together', the pandemic 'has exacerbated existing structural and social inequalities, with particularly negative health outcomes for those already disadvantaged', according to a copious review of evidence by the British Academy (2021: 64). Research has also highlighted some of the inequalities that young people have experienced (e.g. Day et al, 2022). The 'unfairness' and inequalities of the COVID-19 pandemic have even been noticed by the headmaster of Eton College, who remarked that 'many of those who work in the lowest-paid roles are in fact the key to our survival' (Reuters, May 2nd 2020, our emphasis).

Thus, inequalities of class and ethnicity vis-à-vis morbidity and mortality became ever more apparent during the course of the pandemic; according to Bambra et al (2021), COVID-19 'has killed unequally, been experienced unequally and will impoverish unequally', with these inequalities in part resulting from political choices by governments (Bambra et al, 2021).

Many of the emergent youth-related studies have had a psychological focus on the pressures of the moment during the pandemic. This is valuable research (and has helped confirm some of our own findings) but our approach is different and based in sociologically-informed, critical Youth Studies (see MacDonald et al, 2019). This means that we: question over-generalised depictions of young people and look for differences and inequalities between young people (of different classes, genders, ethnicities and so on) as well as between generations; decipher how 'youth' as a social, political and economic category is constructed for particular purposes (e.g. in media or policy representations); and, fundamentally, that we examine the sociological implications of the COVID-19 crisis for social reproduction in the youth phase, particularly for how young people make transitions to adulthood.

The aims of the report are to:

a) present the views and experiences of young people in the North East of England which were gathered contemporaneously during the pandemic and under lockdown;

b) describe our research project findings, alongside other research on the immediate effects of the pandemic on youth and youth transitions (in the second section);

c) situate this discussion in a longer socio-historical context that acknowledges the preceding, already hostile conditions that faced young people in the UK (section three) and identify some of the longer-term implications and pressures to come for young people (section four);

d) set out (in conclusion) some imperatives for future youth research and youth policy that are suggested by this analysis.

Methodology

The 'Youth Under Lockdown' study: research design and methods

The research had two distinct phases: firstly, the Youth Under Lockdown Survey, and, secondly, follow-up interviews with survey respondents and focus groups with practitioners who work with young people. The research was supported by the Youth Futures Foundation, by Durham University (who also granted ethical approval, via the Department of Sociology), and by the University of Huddersfield. It was carried out in collaboration with Children North East and the North East Youth Alliance (a partnership between Youth Focus North East and North East Youth) – charities that work with children and young people in the North East of England.

A key aim of the project was to produce research of value to organisations like these and collaboration helped in developing the research questions, in recruiting participants and in disseminating the research and its results. The research brought us into contact with many youth-oriented charities and services in the North East and more widely and we are extremely grateful for their input.

We selected the North East for largely pragmatic reasons. It is the place where we all live and where we have long-standing connections with agencies like these (and, for practical purposes, we needed to limit the geographic scope of the study to make it feasible). Like other areas, it contains wide social inequalities that are relevant to the study of the effects of the pandemic. We have not sought to understand or present our findings as being 'North East specific' and we have not undertaken a systematic comparison with research from other UK regions; as we will show, our findings are very similar to those from national studies.

2.1 Phase 1: The survey

We launched the Youth Under Lockdown on-line survey on 24th April 2020, with the aim of contemporaneously uncovering the views and experiences of young people in North East England about the pandemic and associated lockdowns. We targeted a wider age range (14 to 30 years) than is typical of most contemporary COVID-19 related research on children and young people because we wanted to capture the long sweep of extended youth transitions, including experiences of secondary school pupils waiting to take GCSEs and A-levels, of further education college trainees, of young workers and the unemployed, of university students and graduates.

The anonymous online survey was brief and simple to complete (see Appendix). After providing some basic socio-demographic details, respondents were asked to 'tell us about how the crisis and lockdown are affecting you, positively and negatively' in their own words and at unspecified length. In this sense, it can be understood as 'a qualitative survey' (see Braun et al, 2020).

We promoted the survey by local television news (the BBC were particularly helpful here) and print media, through schools, colleges, universities, student unions, social and health services, through youth organisations, and through direct contact with young people. The survey closed on October 19th 2020, thus covering only the first main period of UK lockdown and the easing of some restrictions in the summer of

2020. There were 946 survey responses with 162 of these people indicating that they would be willing to participate in follow-up interviews. The opportunistic nature of the sampling means that the survey is not statistically representative and we have not attempted any substantive quantitative analysis (beyond descriptive statistics of the sample, below).

We were encouraged, however, by the scale of response from young people in the North East and the socio-demographic details supplied showed good coverage across the region (e.g. from Northumberland to Teesside), across the age range (although there was a skew towards younger people – around 75% were aged under 21 years), and by ethnicity (young people from British Pakistani backgrounds were very slightly over-represented compared with the North East population).

Given this age profile, it is not surprising that over 80% had educational qualifications below degree level and that about 80% of the sample lived with parents, guardians or carers. It is very difficult to gather reliable social class information with a short, online survey of this sort so we did not attempt this. The potential for the underrepresentation of working-class people and other disadvantaged groups in social surveys is a common and long-standing problem (see Lorant et al, 2007) and it is possible that we have an over-representation of middle-class young people in our survey.

We do know, however, that a significant proportion (27%) of the survey sample were 'in the labour market' rather than in education (i.e. they were working full-time or part-time, self-employed or unemployed as their main activity). The most obvious over-representation was by gender, with nearly 70% of the sample being female (this is not unusual and there is an extensive literature on survey response by gender; see for instance Smith, 2008, in respect of this in online surveys).

Overall, the absolute number of respondents, and their socio-demographic spread, means that the survey was valuable in getting a wide-ranging view of the pandemic from young people across the North East. We were struck by the similarities in what young people said and our findings are also predominantly in line with more rigorous, statistically representative surveys in other parts of the country. For example, the British Academy's extensive review of evidence of the impact of the pandemic (2021: 64) described the same, widely experienced negative effects on young people's mental health, with many of the same drivers as mentioned by our respondents (e.g. family tensions, isolation from friends, worries about the health impact of the virus on loved ones and anxiety about future prospects).

In respect of analysis, a random sample (n. 200) of the survey responses was read by all the research team who independently volunteered suggestions for coding categories. These were similar and it was easy to arrive at a set of a dozen main themes for coding the mass of textual material gathered, via the NVivo software system (a similar process was used to code and organise transcripts of the interviews with young people). Our partner youth work agencies also asked us to look for material in survey responses that was pertinent to their current priorities (e.g. potential workforce development needs for youth services in the region).

2.2 Phase Two: Interviews with young people and youth practitioners

The second main element of our research design was a set of qualitative, semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with a sub-sample of 35 young people invited from the 162 survey respondents who registered an interest in taking part in a follow-up

interview. By the time we came to undertake interviews, in Spring-Summer 2021, the effective sample for interviews was substantially reduced because many of the original volunteers no longer wished to participate and some were not contactable. We used socio-demographic information about age, gender and ethnicity to generate a sample of interviewees that was as representative as possible. As it happened, proportionately more of the interview sample, compared with the survey, were university students (aged 18 to 21 years).

The aim of the interviews was to provide a more detailed and in-depth investigation of young people's experiences and views, including how these may have changed over time since the onset of the pandemic and lockdown(s), of similarities, differences and inequalities in experience, of engagement or otherwise with services, and outlooks on the future. Obviously, the contingencies of the pandemic and associated restrictions meant that these interviews were undertaken at-a-distance and online, via platforms such as 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.

During phase two, a series of online focus groups were facilitated with youth work and social welfare practitioners of different sorts that have worked with young people during the pandemic. Two collaborative focus groups were undertaken with our partner agencies in January 2021, which focused on sharing understanding from across the sector, workers' experiences and insights and workers' reflections on young people's experiences. Two further focus groups were carried out in November 2021. In total, over 25 organisations providing services for and/or working with young people across the North East contributed to the focus groups, including youth work, mental health, sports, educational, uniformed, statutory and third sector services. Findings from this part of the research are integrated alongside material from the survey and interviews with young people, in the following pages.

PRESSURE BEFORE: The socio-economic context of the COVID-19 pandemic for young people

The early decades of the 21st century were unpropitious times to be young. Youth unemployment had begun to rise in 2004 (Petrongolo and Van Reenen, 2011) even before the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2007/8. This ushered in subsequent deep recession and, in the UK at least, far-reaching, government austerity policies that combined to drastically reduce opportunities and support for children and young people (Intergenerational Foundation, 2015; Webb et al, 2022). Young people were especially hard hit by public spending cuts (Unison, 2016), for instance to the EMA, Surestart and Youth Services. Research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation showed that 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, 2015).

When they did find jobs, long-term wage stagnation, rising unemployment 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 political or

policy attention (Fahmy, 2018). 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 many young adults, particularly those who are already socially or educationally disadvantaged, the labour market often only 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).

This same project, by Purcell and colleagues, found that 'a significant proportion' of young labour market entrants 'were confined to the least acceptable options offered by the gig economy' (ibid: 35; see also MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019). Underemployment became a more widely spread problem for young workers, and not just the most disadvantaged. In 2014, Gardiner (2014) estimated that 2.5 million (or two in five) young people were underemployed in the UK labour market (a figure that had risen substantially since the recession of 2008). She counted: temporary workers who wanted permanent jobs; the economically inactive who wanted a job; people who wanted to work more hours than currently; those on training schemes; and those 'over-qualified' for the work they were doing. For example, in 2018, the OECD reported that one quarter of England and Northern Ireland graduates were employed in jobs at just school-leaver level (Weale, 2018).

Insecurity proliferated beyond the labour market with young adults facing an unwelcoming housing market with prohibitive material barriers, and the apparent impossibility of home ownership, giving rise to the label 'Generation Rent' (Cribb et al., 2019). Multiple marginalising forces – for instance, entrenched deprivation, housing precarity, and welfare sanctioning – can combine with personally devastating effects (NE Homelessness Think Tank, 2016). These problems have been linked to a mental health crisis amongst young people (e.g. Parkin et al., 2019). For these sorts of reason, Standing sees young adults as 'the core of the Precariat' (2011: 4) and Bessant (2017) talks of 'the precarious generation'.

The UK has long lacked a concerted and comprehensive youth policy agenda (Coles, 2002; King, 2016; King and MacDonald, forthcoming) and the main policy foci of successive governments have been to reduce the proportion of young people who are 'not in education, employment and training' (NEET) and to increase participation in higher education. Close to half the age cohort now become HE students. It is debateable that this policy of 'human capital' investment will secure prosperous futures for all students, in a context of substantial student debt, an unequal, socially stratified higher education system and the apparent over-supply of graduates to the labour market (see MacDonald, forthcoming).

Although well-known socio-economic inequalities shape youth transitions, these problems are not simply ones reserved for 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 (Barr and Malik, 2016; Roberts, 2011), and intergenerational divides appear to be significant politically. For instance, young voters were very heavily skewed towards 'remain' in the referendum that led to the UK leaving the EU (Sloam and Henn, 2019).

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Young People

In sum, all young adults in the UK have faced exceptional changes in the context of youth transitions since the GFC and earlier but these will not have been experienced equally (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; MacDonald, 2011). Questions about new and older inequalities within and between generations and the growing precarity of youth are all pressing issues for the global Youth Studies community (e.g. Côté, 2014; GNPRYT, 2020). Elsewhere, we concluded that by 2020, after a decade of austerity, youth transitions in the UK had reached crisis point (King and MacDonald, forthcoming). The COVID-19 crisis is likely to exacerbate these inequalities, not least by further disrupting 'normal' educational and labour market pathways.

This brief overview gives a sense of the hostile social, economic and policy landscape for all young people in the UK before the onset of the COVID-19 crisis. Next, we review the immediate pressures and problems experienced during the pandemic, drawing on our own and others' research.

PRESSURE NOW: The 'Youth Under Lockdown' findings

4.1 Relationships, home and daily life

Unsurprisingly, given that one of the prime commands of lockdown in most phases was to 'stay home', a good deal of survey commentary was about housing, home and home life, and young people's relationships with parents, siblings and friends, and about how daily life was spent. As we will see, there was not one, single, straightforward story here. Young people's experiences varied – sometimes over time – and they were also indicative of inequalities between people, for instance in terms of the extent and type of resources available at home, such as personal space and opportunities for privacy.

Many commented that relationships had improved, talking positively about the extra time available to spend with family members. They had reconnected through shared meals and activities, and some had played important roles in maintaining the household while parents continued to work; cooking, doing household chores, taking on childcare roles, supporting home schooling and shopping for grandparents. For these young people, family relationships proved to be a valued resource.

Conversely, some respondents talked about strained relationships and the greater potential for arguments under the pressures of lockdown:

> "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 [because of lockdown rules] … I just wanted my own space." (14-16 years, female, survey) [1]

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[1] Because of the large numbers involved in the survey, we have not attempted to suggest pseudonyms for respondents and present only their self-described gender and age categories.

> "Trapped, all the time. I want to go out with my girlfriend and mates who distract me from my current problems in life. Yet I'm stuck in the house with arguments everywhere." (14-16 years, male, survey)

> "I'm unhappy living in this flat, I have no space to be myself. The room I'm staying in is really my niece's room. It's full of toys and she is constantly in and out making a mess in it. I miss my usual routine. But I know we are months if not a year away from life being normal again." (19-21 years, male, survey)

Practitioners explained how challenging it could be to support young people during the lockdown periods, particularly the first one. Even with (often limited) access to online communication resources, like Zoom or Facetime, talking about their experiences could be risky for young people with other family members within earshot (e.g. for young LGB and/or T people who were not 'out' to their parents or those in households with domestic abuse). One youth worker talked about how traumatic the lockdowns were for young people in care, who often felt hidden from and forgotten by society as they became cut-off from familiar relationships. One young woman living in a Children's Home wrote:

> "[lockdown is] awful as I can't see my family or friends. And I'm stuck with new people." (14-16 years, female, survey)

Many young people moved back into parental homes at the start of the first lockdown, especially those who had been studying at college or university and this could be a particular source of tension as it seemed to be a reversal of their life progress and one which often came with unwelcome new restrictions and loss of privacy and private space:

> "It was, uh, it was quite kind of strained. I think just generally, like the pressure and stress of lockdown...I was finishing my degree at the time. My younger sister was still living at home 'cause she was finishing her A levels. So, we had both of us trying to kind of do schoolwork. Both my parents were working from home, so there was just like four of us in the house, like, all the time. Obviously, you could only go for what was it, one hour a day walk I think, was the rules. So, there was just not any space." (22-25 years, female, interview)

Although official guidance, did allow children and young people to spend time with, and move between the houses of, separated parents, sometimes individuals felt they had the difficult choice of deciding which parent to live with, and young people in relationships often had to choose which partner's family to move in with, at times causing additional tensions.

As noted earlier, many of those who took part in follow-up interviews, a year or so after the questionnaire survey, were university students, some having made this educational transition to university during the intervening period. Compared with others in the survey, higher education students reported greater mobility and diversity in terms of their housing situations during the pandemic, for example, moving from university accommodation back to parental homes at the time of the first lockdown then returning to university accommodation or moving out to live with friends and partners as soon as the first lockdown restrictions were eased.

"So, I've just moved in by myself now. When I was there [parental home] it was a bit of a struggle to be honest - being a 25-year-old man going back home and looking to parents because we clash, different lifestyles and that. And to be honest, it did cause a lot of a lot of tensions and did end up with, you know, some mental health issues that were obviously exacerbated by COVID." (22-25 years, male, interview)

Young people talked vividly and often about missing their friends. This seemed to be one of the most deeply felt losses; they felt cut off from peers and from the informal social life that has been recognised as significant to the youth phase for over a century at least (Hall, 1904). Those with partners reported missing them, even with the opportunity for phone or video calls. This is one of those inter-generational inequalities of lockdown. Whilst the lockdowns of the pandemic could be hard on single, separated or widowed adults, older people often have the choice to live with their romantic/sexual partners; this is not true for most young people – and they were forced by law to be separate from partners and friends in a way that was particularly hard on this age group. Friendships and partnerships were considered vital resources and diminishing contact was a source of significant anxiety and loneliness. Even when young people had family around them they sometimes felt lonely, suggesting that for this age group contact with peers and friends is an important plank of well-being.

"[I am] Feeling alone and useless as I can't see my friends and have no routine to keep me going. Argue with my parents all the time because we all get on each other's nerves and not allowed to leave the house to get away from it and clear my head…The idea that we don't actually know when lockdown will end really scares me because my age group really needs to go out and socialise and at the minute I feel lost and lonely because it's not normal." (14-16 years, female, survey)

"My depression is at an all-time low. I'm flat broke as my bar job has stopped. I'm so lonely it's painful. I miss people." (22-25 years, male, survey)

Youth workers reported to us the various ways that they had responded to the pandemic, for example by moving to or developing online provision such as support groups. Attendance was variable and often dependent on an individual's digital resources. As the pandemic continued, the enthusiasm of young people for on-line youth work groups waned; like others, they felt 'Zoomed out'. Practitioners reported how desperate young people were to be back in physical spaces with their peers in person. Once restrictions allowed, many youth work organisations adapted their provision to detached youth work, walking around their local communities and spaces and engaging with young people on the streets.

This sense of being cut off and stuck in was made worse for some respondents by the lack of privacy and lack of space that their homes afforded. Private space in the home provides an important resource for teenagers in developing their identities and sense of self (e.g. Lincoln, 2015). Inequalities of access to space in the home and, specifically, to outside space such as a garden have, however, rarely been commented on in youth sociology to the best of our knowledge (although overcrowding is known to be a factor in pushing young parents to seek independent housing; Ladlow, 2021). We have no data on this in respect of age but we do know

that one in eight households in the UK did not have access to a private or shared garden during the lockdown, with this problem being most acute in London and more likely to affect Black people rather than White people (ONS, 2020).

Negative media stories about young people, during the pandemic, frequently pictured them socialising and apparently 'breaking the rules' in public green spaces, with little attention given to inequalities of access to gardens (e.g. The Independent, 2021). Research has identified lack of access to nature, to parks and public space during the pandemic as one factor that has contributed to mental health problems for young people (World Economic Forum, 2021). The garden 'haves' and 'have nots' is perhaps a new aspect of youth inequality and was occasionally recognised by respondents in the survey and frequently talked about in the later interviews:

> "We live in a fairly big house with a big garden on the edge of [City] and we have an allotment, so I think I'm quite lucky." (17-18 years, male, survey).

> "I am aware that I have it a lot better than others in my age group – I live in a house with a garden and have my own room – so I can only guess at the repercussions this quarantine is having on my generation as a whole." (17-18 years, female, survey)

> "[going for a walk] is especially useful as I live in a flat which has no communal gardens. My block is a small block in an area with houses with nice gardens and 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)

> "…my boyfriend and I have been falling out more as I feel frustrated and lonely. He lives with his parents and sister, and they have a garden, allotment and access to long walks whereas I don't have any of these." (19-21 years, female, survey)

After a year of lockdowns and restrictions, private outdoor space was highly valued:

> "So, we had a bit of a garden. It was better than nothing. And some people didn't have didn't even have that. And it was nice once things started to ease - we could put a table out there and have people over." (17-18, female, interview)

Filling and structuring time is often a challenge for people when they are deprived of the positive social psychological functions of 'work' (e.g. Jahoda, 1982), even when 'work' comes in the form of going to school, college or university. Interestingly, however, many reported being able to impose routine and to spend time productively (e.g. exploring new hobbies or new exercise regimes). Regular exercise was a cornerstone of perceived resilience and several respondents welcomed the opportunity to take life at a slower pace, to discover new hobbies and skills, and even to engage in self-reflection.

Others floundered:

> "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 and with my own thoughts." (17-18 years, female, survey)

The absence of routine, the loss of motivation and disengagement from activities was often commented on in the survey. Boredom was a key feature of these 'Netflix' or 'Groundhog Days'. Life became disorienting without the regular structure of the working day, working week and working year (this is a well-known finding from social-psychological studies of unemployment; e.g. Jahoda, 1982). Days merged into each other:

> "I have no real sense of time anymore. Not only is it difficult to remember what the date is, or what day of the week it is I even had to double-check the month the other day! Without a consistent schedule, it's really easy to stay up late, get up late, take multiple naps etc, without any consequences." (26-30 years, non-binary, survey).

Even in the later interviews, when there were significantly fewer restrictions and those respondents that had been disengaged from work or study had had the opportunity to re-engage, there remained a sense of temporal dislocation and lost time:

> "My perception of time is so skewed, It's really strange. I feel like it's flown by and then taken years at the same time. It's like, the last 18 months I, I wouldn't be even able to deliver like a coherent story line. What happened then and what happened when and what month was it." (19-21 years, female, interview)

> "The weeks seemed very long, until you sort of, take a look back at them and think "Oh my God, two months have gone past and I didn't realise". I lose days as well, like yesterday I went to work, and they were like "What are you doing? You're off on Mondays", and I went "No, today is Sunday and I'm working today" and they went "No"." (17-18 years, female, interview).

> "It's just a haze to be honest. Yeah. Haze is a good word, it was 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. It could I could say like, 'Oh, it's a week ago' but it's actually like three months ago,." (14-16 years, male, interview)

Overall, whilst a sense of time disruption, general anxiety and negative mental health were commonly reported (as we discuss below), some young people seemed to fare better during the pandemic – emotionally and psychologically – than others did. As with earlier research on the psychological effects of unemployment on people, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how or why it is that some people appear to be more resilient than others (Hayes and Nutman, 1981). There are indications from our research, however, that different types of resources – for example, economic capital (the money to do things with), space at home and

access to outside space, and time (e.g. away from caring responsibilities or the pressurised conditions of key worker jobs) played some part in this and, of course, these are resources that are unequally distributed amongst young people.

4.2 Mental health

The pandemic's negative psychological impact was the largest, single theme in our survey analysis.

The 'negative impacts on mental health and well-being' of the pandemic for children and young are now widely reported but were 'largely unpredicted'(British Academy, 2021: 64). We did not employ standardised psychological measures so we rely wholly on the words that respondents used to describe their experiences, and these tended to confirm the findings of studies with more developed psychological methods (e.g. as reported by the British Academy, 2021). Thus, as with other studies, the mental 'dis-ease' expressed by our participants tended to stem from family tensions, fears about the virus, isolation from friends and partners, and worries about future prospects. In respect of the latter, the ILO (2021: 2) have pointed to the impact of 'the dire economic and labour market situation' on young people's mental health and well-being.

Similarly, in our study, young people with pre-existing mental health problems seemed to be the worst affected (see ILO, 2021: 2). Young people have fared worse than other age groups, with rates of probable mental health disorders rising to one in six children (aged five to 16) in England, compared with one in nine three years earlier (NHS, 2020). Girls, those from low income families, and those with pre-existing mental health problems, or SEND have had the worst outcomes (Prince's Trust and the Education Policy Institute, 2021; Ambitious About Autism, 2021).

In our survey, young people expressed a widespread sense of what we might call mental 'ill-being'. They talked about increased 'anxiety', 'stress', 'depression' and 'worry' and spoke of a greater propensity to 'feel low', or to have 'panic attacks' or 'negative thoughts'. They also frequently reported difficulty sleeping or unwelcome changes to their sleep patterns:

> "[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).

> "…the government have tried to push the idea that they are working hard to make mental health services a priority… but all they've done is released a few web pages with basic tips you can try to take your mind off things. People with serious mental health issues… it barely scrapes the surface." (26-30 years, female, survey).

> "The lockdown has really negatively affected me. I understand the reasons for it and I would never break the rules but every day it gets harder and harder. My anxiety is the worst it's ever been. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and wonder what the point is of facing another day. Myself and my

parents are fighting worse than ever due to the pressurised environment." (19-21years, female, survey).

Admittedly, this was not a question that we asked directly but it is still surprising, given the frequency that aspects of mental ill-being were reported, that virtually no examples of contacts with health, welfare or youth services were given in the survey responses. Our focus groups with local youth work and other practitioners revealed how difficult it was to operate effectively during the pandemic, despite their best efforts, a particular worry being those young people who were 'only just getting by' and who remained invisible to services. Across the board, practitioners from a range of statutory and voluntary agencies talked about their concerns for young people's mental health, reflecting the experiences and disclosures shared with them. Recognising the crisis in youth mental health prior to the pandemic and already overstretched services, addressing this was considered the key priority for services going forward.

4.3 Education

Worsened mental health is linked to the 'relentless uncertainty' of the pandemic (Waite, 2021), particularly in relation to education and employment (ILO,2021). Lockdown meant severe disturbance to regimes of learning and qualification, as government ministers dallied and U-turned on decisions about summer examinations (The Guardian, 2021a). Young people's educational experiences, or lack of them, were bound up in worsening mental health:

> "I have found this home-schooling very hard. It feels like I haven't been learning as much as I should have. I found it hard to talk to other people and when I do I get very emotional." (14-16 years, female, survey)

> "I spend an unnecessary amount of time on certain lessons. This has led me to fall behind in many of my subjects and has caused a lot of stress." (14-16 years, male, survey)

There was a wide sense of falling behind and missing out on education, the result of adjusting to new online learning formats (and inequalities in technological skills and equipment), uneven support from schools and colleges, flagging motivation, and assessment uncertainties. Respondents worried about the risks posed to expected, normal educational transitions from GCSE to A-levels and, even more angst-provoking, from A-level to university. The future felt uncertain:

> "The worst part is not knowing when it is going to end… this is going to be in our lives for such a long time. I don't feel like I can look forward to some things that I am missing because I only get disappointed when I still don't have it." (17-18 years, female, survey)

Respondents often worried about the negative impact of the pandemic on their learning (see National Audit Office, 2021). By the time of our interviews, an improvement had been seen in educational provision and communications between schools and students, but there remained a cumulative loss of learning. Distractions and declining motivation meant that school work could take much longer at home:

> "A piece of work that would only take thirty minutes in the classroom now takes from one to three hours because we get distracted, can't comprehend the material as fast as before, or simply see no point in doing the work due to a lack of motivation." (14-16 years, male, interview).

Practitioner interviewees reported that the longer the pandemic went on, the more young people struggled, despite the fact that online educational provision generally steadily improved or at least increased over that time. Young people had 'had enough', were 'Zoomed out', felt isolated and struggled to learn on their own.

Research has shown how social class inequalities, particularly the impact of poverty, impacted on young people's experiences of education during the pandemic. The pandemic 'magnified' the factors that we know contribute to negative outcomes for young people growing up in poverty (Children North East and the Child Poverty Action Group, 2020). Family budgets were strained severely by the need to buy items such as laptops and forty per cent of low-income families lacked at least one essential resource to support their children's learning (ibid.). The IFS (2021a) report that some pupils may have 'lost half a year or more against normal progress' and how '…pupils at private schools were twice as likely as those at state schools to get regular online teaching'.

Within the state sector, those from better-off backgrounds got more active school support than the less well-off and 'poorer children worked fewer hours, got less support and had less access to study spaces and online materials' (ibid.). The National Audit Office (2021) found that the government's tutoring scheme to help pupils 'catch up' after lost learning was failing to reach the most disadvantaged children. Our findings hinted at these inequalities and, our survey conducted during the first lockdown, revealed that many students found education and learning stressful and difficult:

> "…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 and PowerPoints to complete... I have no-one to contact if I'm struggling." (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." (16-18 years, female, survey)

The pandemic exacerbated well-known inequalities associated with 'the digital divide', with the North East said to be particularly disadvantaged. For instance, one in three people in the region is said to be a 'passive and uncommitted internet user', compared with one in five nationally (North East LEP, 2021). A particular problem for our respondents was competition for hardware (e.g. the family laptop), for Wi-Fi bandwidth, and for physical space to work when parents and children were all working from home. These challenges continued unabated throughout the numerous lockdowns:

> "Through the second lockdown when they introduced live lessons, then, that was a lot more stressful. There were a few times when my internet just

switched off quite suddenly because, obviously, we had my mum working on it as well…I'd say definitely the second time it was more important to have a good broadband because the live lessons, you have a time slot that you have to be there, whereas in the first lockdown it was just e-mails being sent…but I wasn't really learning because it wasn't proper teaching face-to-face...I missed, like, the actual learning part but I didn't really notice until I went back to school that I couldn't remember anything that we had done." (14-16 years, male, interview)

Digital poverty was also perceived to be a massive problem by practitioners who shared stories with us of the young people they worked with. Many had little or no on-line access, having previously relied on free Wi-Fi in public places. A single, family device, such as a tablet or parent's mobile phone, was often relied upon to access school work, leaving no data or credit left over for contacting friends, social media or surfing the web.

For university students hit by lockdown, sometimes hard choices had to be made about which parent to live with (sometimes based on accessibility of Wi-Fi and a lap-top, as well as physical space):

"When I initially moved out of my student accommodation to save money, I had to stay at my Dad's (who I don't get on with) to use his Wi-Fi and his laptop to complete my work (I'm a graphic design student so these are essential to me). Just recently I have had to move back to my Mam's house as being in my Dad's was affecting me mentally. I don't have any Wi-Fi or a laptop here and the University hasn't been too helpful in my situation other than offer the chance to apply for a laptop grant which wouldn't help either way as I need Wi-Fi to download graphic design software." (19-21 years, female, interview).

Young people's digital engagement also intersected with disabilities:

"It's really hard to find motivation to get on with some schoolwork but when I do, because what I'm learning is new, I find it difficult to fully understand everything because I'm just taking notes from a PowerPoint. Also, I'm dyslexic so reading lots of words and trying to process all the new information is often challenging and can take longer than it would the average person. I can email my teacher for support but it sometimes takes a while and I can't always understand the response. All of my work is set online and I can't always find where it is stored". (17-18 years, female, survey).

"A lot of the online resources, I found hard to access, I'm very dyslexic. So, it takes me a long time to read through things like…it just takes me that long to get through and process." (22-25 years, agender, interview)

Inequalities could reflect family cultural capital. One young woman, studying for GCSEs, signalled how differences in parental education had an effect:

"I have so much work piling up - but I don't understand some of it! There's no-one I can ask for help since neither of my parents did GCSEs." (14-16 years, female, survey)

Popular media narratives about youth, the pandemic and lockdowns tend to forget that some young adults are also parents themselves. This was the case for some of our survey respondents. They often had to juggle care for their children, home learning, normal domestic work and employment:

> "It is a struggle prioritising my job and teaching my children to ensure they don't fall too far behind with school. This is my biggest challenge daily." (26-30 years, female, survey)

Practitioners also talked of the impact on young people who cared for younger siblings (reflecting responses in our surveys). With 'key worker' parents at work, older siblings were expected to care for their young siblings, often including domestic tasks such as feeding and home learning or entertaining small children. Within this situation, undertaking their own on-line schoolwork became virtually impossible.

For those young people who were in secondary and tertiary education, our interviews remind us that the disruptions caused by the pandemic continued across two academic years. For secondary school students, the return to the classroom contained its own stresses and once again there was evidence of wide divergence in the levels of support received by students, and the efficacy of their own adaptation. Examinations and assessments continued to be a source of worry, as did uncertainty about how work would be assessed, as well as the long-term implications of both altered grading regimes and students' own perceived lack of adequate progress:

> "So, the first one [lockdown], I handled that very, very badly, didn't really learn anything at all…The second one…the work was a bit more organised. We did have Zoom's then. But I just, I felt like I wasn't being pushed as much as I would be in a classroom, and... because I was working from a bedroom I didn't really have the motivation to push myself for the exams or anything like that. It was a lot of frustration from my side. And I got very upset because I knew… I have a few friends that go to different schools and private schools and I knew they were getting the learning that they needed, and I wasn't, and it was just really frustrating." (17-18 years, female, interview)

> "My motivation though was completely shattered. I've always been quite driven. Il just lost it all, like it just disappeared. To be honest, I didn't really regain it 'til it was after exams. I didn't have much during the exams, it just, yeah, I really struggled with motivation. 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, in a way." (14-16 years, male, interview)

4.4 Employment

The ILO (2021: 13) describe the pandemic as bringing 'by far the most severe and widespread jobs crisis faced by young people during the new millennium'. As with previous recessions, young adults have fared worse than older age groups during this 'COVID-19 recession'. Globally, youth employment fell by 8.7 per cent in 2020

compared with 3.7 per cent for adults. Despite government interventions which have constrained job losses (such as the UK's furlough scheme, which kept people in employment even if not actually working and paid a subsidised wage equivalent to 80% of normal pay), age disparities were largest in 'high income countries', with falls in employment for young people being five times greater than for adults (ILO, 2021: 4).

Globally and in the UK, young adults are overrepresented in occupational sectors such as retail and hospitality work that have been particularly vulnerable to governments' lockdown measures, meaning they have faced much higher rates of redundancy, job loss and furloughing (Resolution Foundation, 2020a). This has affected as many as 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 (ibid.). Young workers are more likely than others to work in the 'gig economy' of non-standard and insecure forms of work (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019).

According to the Resolution Foundation (2020a), this group has faced even higher rates of furloughing and job loss: affecting around two-fifths of younger gig workers. Even with the benefit of the government's furlough scheme, 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 regularly works 'flexibly' (say, a twenty-hour week), furlough 'pay' will amount to only 80 per cent of the ten hours per week. Effectively, pay reduces from twenty hours to eight hours per week. At 2020 national minimum wage rates this amounted to £51.60 per week rather than £129 per week[2]. The financial costs of the pandemic impacted on respondents. 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 and other working 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." (22-25years, other, interview).

> "My dad has also lost his job as a result so we are struggling [financially] however I'm earning as I have been furloughed from McDonald's." (14-16 years, female, survey)

> "Feeling down and uninspired, no motivation… Worried about the future…Parents unentitled to any furlough pay as both recently went self-employed and not eligible so I am main breadwinner with my 80% pay but not sure if I'll have a job at the end of all this and I'm meant to be moving out in summer!" (19-21 years, female, survey)

A significant proportion of respondents had been furloughed (they appreciated the temporary safety but worried about the future) or had lost jobs. The following example is from a young woman who had a hospitality-sector job:

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[2] This example is drawn from the direct experience of the first author's daughter. She was made redundant from this job, with a national clothes retail chain, when it collapsed during the pandemic.

> "I'm lucky to be furloughed… but there is a constant worry of the building being shut down due to lack of funds and looking for something with my skill-set is difficult. Working in the hospitality industry, being the first to close down with pretty much immediate effect, has me thinking of possibly changing my career path. It's frightening how quickly I was out of work. I wouldn't want the same experience again." (19-21years, female, interview).

The COVID-19 recession was unusually harsh for young people because, lockdown measures curtailed new job searches for the unemployed and because there was heavy demand from all age groups for the 'entry-level' jobs typically taken by lower skilled, young workers (ILO, 2021). This was echoed by practitioners who talked about youth unemployment, especially the frequency with which young people had lost, often casualised and uncontracted, jobs and had little understanding of what their entitlements might be to redundancy or furlough.

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 2,932 applications (The Independent, 13th 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).

> "My younger brother found it the hardest because he'd already been out of work for long enough. He'd found like uni wasn't for him. He'd started going into that and then dropped out. He tried a different course but then that still wasn't working it just turned out, like academically, university just wasn't where you want it to be so when he was looking for work in general, it was already quite difficult without like a BA to get anywhere. And, so, when the pandemic came and he was, like, still continually out of work and it was a real battle for him just to try and find anything. And he was, he was feeling the weight of that." (22-25 years, other, interview).

In the follow-up interviews, the respondents were keenly aware of the impact of the pandemic on their own job prospects and those of their peers. Even those of school-age sometimes voiced their worries about the future:

> "I am scared about the future that people my age will face, economically and education-wise. I'm worried that this will influence my grades for A levels next year - and jeopardise my future. I feel anxious this will hold me back." (17-18 years, female, survey)

Interviewees also raised some of the less direct impacts on their employment trajectories. These included the fears of 'stalling', of 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 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 like,

this is, 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).

Young people shared these anxieties about the future with practitioners, who reported that even younger people in their early teens were worried about the knock-on impacts to their education and uncertainty for job prospects.

If some respondents acknowledged the benefits of flexible working, working from home and even opportunities for more creative career development, most expressed either concern at the difficulties with working from home or – more commonly, and as new and inexperienced entrants to the labour market, worries about getting jobs, keeping jobs and being able to do jobs properly under the pressures of the pandemic:

"If you're on lockdown number one, that was one of those times where I didn't have a job anymore. All the jobs that I had been going for had been shut down part way through the process. So, even if I'd, like, gone through to the final stage of the interview and they were like 'oh yeah we like you, but everything's closed now, so we're going to discontinue this application process for a later date'...And so the only job I had was a casual museum assistant job, which obviously museums would be closed. So, there was nothing I could do after that. And I didn't have furlough. And so that was the end of normal work, so I ended up every day, I would spend at least a couple of hours searching for work and then not find any." (26-30 years, male, interview).

"They [employer] kept restructuring, which basically means reducing head counts. And obviously people are so busy and management so busy I've effectively been left to fend for yourself, I'll be lucky if I can speak to a manager maybe 10-15 minutes a week. And then I'm just expected to just do my job. Because that alongside that the whole thing kind of culminated in me sort of starting therapy a lot about this time last year, and sort of starting on antidepressants at that point." (22-25 years, male, interview).

Despite this disruption and 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 survey, as nurses, police officers, teaching assistants, care assistants, teachers, delivery drivers, shop assistants). We have not been able to find any data on the extent of young adults' employment as key workers and searching using these terms only brings up reports and studies about young people with parents who are key workers or professionals who act as key workers for young people.

One tangential statistic, which gives some sense that this phenomenon is not insignificant, is that, according to the ONS (2020b), 16% of the UK's 10.6 million key workers had children aged 4 and under (i.e. they were likely to be younger aged parents). This is another finding from the research that counters the dominant 'youth problem narrative' associated with the pandemic and lockdowns:

"I think, like, 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, and especially not when I know that so many teenagers are working on COVID wards. People seem to forget that it's not just like middle aged people that work for the NHS. Like, there's a lot of us young people that do as well." (19-21 years, female, interview).

Practitioners echoed this sentiment and described how the pressure had increased for young people in key-worker roles, who were often required to work more hours and sometimes take on more responsibility. For those who were also in education, this had a knock-on impact on their ability to study.

Being a key worker, intensified fears about the risks that they faced, typically, not so much about their own health but that they might pass the virus to their parents or grandparents. This was a major reason for respondents generally supporting lockdown restrictions; again, contra media narratives about 'irresponsible youth' and intergenerational strife spurred by the pandemic:

"Coronavirus has not been much of a worry for me personally, however I am very conscious about sticking to the guidelines, as I have vulnerable family members and, obviously, I want to protect them as much as possible." (14-16 years, female, survey).

4.5 Money and financial security

Worries about jobs inevitably translate into worries over money and financial security. In our survey, money was not raised as a topic by many young people. Those who moved back into the family home after living independently often found this, together with reduced expenditure associated with their social lives, amounted to a welcome opportunity to save money.

"It [the pandemic] just made me realise that nothing´s certain. You know a lot of people I know lost their jobs during the pandemic, so I should always have some sort of savings behind me." (17-18 years, female, interview).

For others, however, the loss of full and part-time jobs, especially those on 'zero-hours' contracts, and the limitations of the furlough scheme for these types of jobs, meant that they – or indeed their parents – faced new and often very substantial financial strain.

"Due to the pandemic my family's slowly running out of money to support the family business and the household." (14-16 years, male, survey).

"I have two part-time jobs when I am at home, both of which need to be put on hold because of COVID. I've found this the most stressful because I need these to afford University…I will still need money for next year and I don't know when I'll be able to earn that again." (26-30 years, female, survey).

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Young People

Some, usually university students, found themselves paying for accommodation they could not occupy. One young man, a 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." (19-21years, male, survey).

For others, it meant new imperatives to contribute to family and household costs, as household income insecurity increased:

> "My father has been furloughed and lost over half of his wage (even though he is still working full-time from home – illegal but there is nothing he can do) … I have had to help financially. My student finance covers my rent and I have about £400 left to live off for the term… due to his furlough, my spare money has gone towards the household bills." (19-21 years, female, survey).

As the pandemic went on, income inequalities became more visible and were cutting more deeply for those with limited household incomes.

> "Things keep breaking in our house, like the washing machine and the spin-dryer. And the TV broke at one point as well. And it's like, just little things that we need, like…I need to wash my work clothes every day to get to work…And it just all mounts up. My mum was definitely stressed that like she couldn't afford it I remember when the spin-dryer broke…I didn't realise how expensive spin-dryers are." (17-18 years, female, interview).

Practitioner interviewees were acutely aware of the financial impacts on young people and their families. Those who worked with young people in poorer communities reported how the consequences could be severe. Several voluntary sector agencies had reallocated resources to provide food parcels and hot meals to those families they knew to be worst affected. Other organisations worked closely with local schools to facilitate free school meals to vulnerable young people. Several practitioners shared their fears about how some young people, whom they were unable to get hold of, might have been experiencing the pandemic.

4.6 Narratives about 'youth', lockdown and the government

Given the harmful educational and employment impacts of COVID-19, one might guess that young people would have been resentful or dismissive of the need for, and regulations around, lockdowns. This was not, however, the case. Contrary to media narratives about the irresponsibility and rule-breaking of young people, and the alleged intergenerational conflict associated with lockdown laws, our respondents in both the survey and the subsequent interviews were largely supportive of, and compliant with, the measures. This was often not just passive compliance but a positive commitment to behaving in ways that kept other people – family and community – safe:

> "I think, in general, people have done pretty well in just following the regulations…Of course, that might just be a result of my life personal bias with, like, my friendships…the social groups, they kept it relatively well, I don't think I really saw anything particularly breaking lockdown regulations. I think

everyone kept themselves quite safe and kept other people safe. I think I did as much as I realistically could have." (14-16 years, male, interview).

"I mean, I've followed them all. Whether I've necessarily at the time agreed with them is another matter because I remember when the lockdown was first happening, I was definitely one of those people that was like, 'do we need to be doing this, you know, is this necessary?'. Because again we talked about the government being all over the place with it and...I was like, 'Well, why is this happening if you said it wasn't a problem, you know, five minutes ago'. And, so, I know the start I was, I was cautious, but following the guidelines any way." (22-25 years, non-binary, interview).

"Difficult. A house move has been put on hold, we've lost a family member to the virus and I'm frustrated with people breaking social distancing rules. Some days are harder than others." (26-30 years, male, survey)

"The lockdown has really negatively affected me. I understand the reasons for it and I would never break the rules but every day it gets harder and harder. (19-21 years, female, survey)

Nobody rejected the regulations completely and few respondents indicated that they had ever disregarded the measures in any substantive way. Indeed, a great many expressed strong frustration with others who ignored the guidelines. Some even expressed guilt when they admitted to having themselves 'bent' rules. This was as much the case in late summer 2021 as it had been in April 2020.

"I've felt disappointed in people that are flouting the lockdown guidelines, particularly those within a similar age range to me. It annoys me because it's not just putting themselves at risk, but everyone, friends, family and community, and as North-Easterners community is vital." (17-18 years, female, interview).

"During the initial stages of lockdown, I broke it by forming a bubble with one person I was in a casual relationship with who lives round the corner. This came with its own difficulties but made it so I could get through the days. I have gone through a lot of emotions from sadness to anger and fear of being publicly shamed." (26-30 years, female, survey).

Youth workers also reported young people's respect for the rules and their awareness of the demonising rhetoric about them. One practitioner talked about the challenges of the restrictions for some families, particularly single parent households, who ordinarily relied on a network of kinship childcare in order to go to work.

Positive or compliant attitudes towards lockdown reflected young people's sense of insecurity about the risks to the health of their families and loved ones and a broader sense of collective, social responsibility. They were also uncertain about the future, post lockdowns. Almost all responses about the future expressed anxiety and a belief in the likely negative outcomes from the pandemic, with a large number of both survey and interview respondents describing their own pessimistic outlooks on

young people's collective future (the IFS found that young people were the age group that was most pessimistic about their immediate financial future; IFS, 2021b):

> "I understand why lockdown has been put in place. However, I feel if we are not given an idea of how we will come out of lockdown or if it is extended further that there will be no economy to come back to causing further worry and anxiety." (26-30 years, female, survey).

> "I'd say slightly more pessimistic just from the side, from the sense of the specific place I am now is - I'm pretty much ready for my next job and I know that there's a lot of competition at the moment. So, I suppose it limits my immediate opportunities, but I'd say realistically long term I don't feel optimistic. I think it's a combination of more people graduating and no jobs to go into, people being sort of let go without anywhere else to work. And, Gen Z plus X, are the two main groups out there." (22-25 years, male, interview).

> "I worry about the amount of conspiracy theories and the way that that's taken hold of people is going to snowball and I know there's always been an element of that but it's felt particularly aggressive and difficult recently… And then obviously an awful lot of people have gone through very profound trauma and grief. And that's going to take a lot of working through. I think there's gonna be a lot of mental health fallout from all of this. There already is. But I think there's more coming. And I suppose it might make people…sort of more appreciative of downtime…but it's really hard to know." (22-25 years, female, interview).

> "I feel scared about the future that people my age will face, economically and education wise. I'm worried that this will…jeopardise my future." (17-18 years, female, survey)

> "It has made my anxieties for the future much more intense." (14-16 years, male, survey)

Young people reflected on the ways they felt society had responded and changed, and the potential long-term societal consequences of the pandemic:

> "In the past [early lockdown], like you know when everyone is kind of getting together and thanking the NHS and like buying shopping for the elderly, like I really thought that we were going to get to that caring society that I've always dreamed of, we would be like a community again. But then somewhere along the line that totally just disappeared again…there's people who have gained such a respect for fellow man and truly just had so much compassion and care for others that they're willing to sacrifice things that they would enjoy…and then there's this side where it's just total selfishness and contempt, and it's almost like the world's changed but it hasn't changed at all." (19-21 years, female, interview).

Often in the interviews, a general pessimism about the future combined with a sense of individual optimism about interviewees' personal prospects: 'things are bleak but I will be ok'. This paradox reflects not just the fact that interviewees recognised in themselves a new awareness about themselves and some often-unexpected

resilience, but also the commonly reported finding in Youth Studies research that young people can often express strongly individualised views of the social world which emphasise their personal ability to 'get on' regardless of well-known social and economic barriers and constraints. This is what Furlong and Cartmel (2007) called 'the epistemological fallacy'.

> "Before I was quite pessimistic person. And I've gained more optimism about life because of the reflection and kind of mindfulness things that I've done. But that doesn't make me any more hopeful for the future of the country. Because amongst it all, like God, we still left the EU, we're still rejecting refugees as if that's an okay thing to do a lot. Yeah, I for myself I feel optimistic, but for the country I feel very pessimistic, huh." (19-21 years, male, interview).

> "I think just having to having to find new ways to do basically everything I've always done in my life like, you know, homework, school, social activities, trying to find new ways and having to actively pursue them, whereas you've always been able to just sort of do it, works itself out. Having to like actively pursue them has definitely taught me a lot about like, you know, being able to control my life, I suppose." (14-16 years, male, interview).

Both the survey and the interviews showed that young people were keenly aware of their own positionality as 'youth', and to the narratives about them which dominated the political and social media discourse. 'Being young' was often expressed in terms of perceptions of missed milestones and experiences commonly associated with youth transitions: exams, school leaver events, 16th and 18th birthday parties, gap years and placements, weddings, group holidays and a lively social life.

> "So, we had what was meant to be a virtual graduation ceremony, but it was just like videos that lecturers recorded with them saying things themselves but like none of our names or anything written or anything. I got my certificate through the post…I have still not really ever celebrated it properly and now it feels like I'm kind of past the point of being able to do that." (19-21 years, female, interview).

Some young people suggested that the pandemic had caused bigger problems for them than it had for older people. Many appreciated the chance of different generations coming together 'against the virus', even if there was a mixed response to 'clapping for the NHS'. Generally, respondents did not appreciate comparisons being drawn between the pandemic and the 'Battle of Britain spirit' and the 'war-time generation' because this implied that:

> "[young people] aren't allowed to get upset or apprehensive because other people had it worse" (19-21 years, female, survey).

> "I think it's had more impact for younger people. I think we've lost out a lot more than older generations who [are in] different stages where like the social element isn't as like massive... I feel like, yeah, it's been crap for everyone, but I feel like the younger generations missed out on more…I feel like there were times where Boris Johnson was sort of blaming young people for not following the regulations, I think, but from where I was standing, I just, I

couldn't see that, like, it was just, I didn't think that was what was happening." (14-16 years, male, interview).

"The people that I feel for…the sort of young people that I feel particularly bad for are first years [undergraduates]. And people who are sort of maybe the 16 to 19 kind of age group, because there's so many social things that happen in that time period that can be quite formative, that I am very lucky that I got to experience in a normal way…when the pandemic started I was 23. So, there were people who started this pandemic at 16...I feel really bad for them because they've missed a lot." (22-25 years, female, interview).

The follow-up interviews allowed us to explore in more depth how young people felt they had been depicted in public discourse. Overwhelmingly, respondents felt that young people had been unfairly 'blamed' and targeted as a cohort (which perhaps now generates an even greater sense of unfairness with revelations about the breaches of lock-down rules and partying of senior government politicians and staff).

"And then there'll be spikes [in infection rates] and people will be, like, 'our young people are being terrible' and I just…see it now that young people will get the blame. And also, like, what does that do to young people's mental health, because then they're, like, 'But I've been told I can go to a nightclub'." (26-30 years, female, interview).

"It has been young people who've been getting a lot of flak and, I think, to an extent it will be true because, you know, you look at say like a festival attendee list and it tends to be like you know early 20s or whatever. But then, you know, a lot of uni students specifically have been getting blamed and it's quite discouraging, I guess, to be used as a scapegoat because…if you were to do the actual numbers on it there's, older people, like 50s 60s 70s who aren't wearing masks properly." (19-21 years, female, interview).

"People are being like, 'oh you people are spreading COVID, you young people are going out partying and spreading COVID. You people don't want the vaccine' and stuff and it's just completely wrong, like they just want somebody to blame. We're actually, we just want it to end now. Yes, we followed every single one of the guidelines. I don't know why people would think that we haven't. So, we're doing our best, and we definitely have had it bad." (17-18 years, male, interview).

It was notable – and perhaps surprising, given these interview comments - that there was very limited discussion in the survey of anything to do with the politics of the pandemic or in relation to government policies. In the interviews we invited young people to reflect on the role of the government throughout the pandemic. There was a strong, common thread in the responses. There was little trust in the Government's handling of the pandemic, criticism of perceived confusion in policy-making and policy-messaging, and widespread unhappiness with the perceived prioritising of the economy over safety. This latter point may seem counter-intuitive, given the lower health risk young people faced compared with older people, but it does reflect recent research that found that the majority of young people wanted government to prioritise social progress (66 per cent) over economic growth (34 per

cent); the opposite of what was found for the over 50s (European Youth Forum, 2021).

> "The government have handled the pandemic terribly, to be honest. I didn't like Boris Johnson to begin with, so I know I'm massively biased, but I just think at every stage of the pandemic, they have not picked the safest response. They've picked something that they think is logical, because of the economy." (26-30 years, female, interview).

> "I don't think the government performed well. Not very well and I think that they didn't go in a lockdown quick enough, and then they came out of lockdown too quick, far too soon and, like, the Christmas thing [introducing very last-minute restrictions] is a bit stupid and I knew that they changed it, but like!" (14-16 years, male, interview).

> "I think the policies necessarily haven't been bad but it's when they do a U turn, or they go against the science, like very bluntly go against it, that's what really bugs us…And it's the fact that the government themselves don't necessarily follow the rules…my family are genuinely convinced as soon as Dominic Cummings broke lockdown, that was it. That was when a lot of people decided they weren't going to bother [following the rules]." (17-18 years, female, interview).

> "And, I mean, I remember…intensely watching the news for every single little announcement, and when they were like considering trying herd immunity. That's the most ashamed I've felt of this country in a long time. I mean, that was just like a new level of neglect from the government." (19-21 years, female, interview).

This was reflected in focus groups with practitioners who commented on young people's political awareness – of their criticism of the government's handling of the pandemic, their anger at having been forgotten about (especially in terms of education), their frustration at their negative and frivolous portrayal in the media and by politicians, and what all of this might mean for their futures.

Thus far, the research has shown that disruptions to key aspects of the youth transition phase – education, employment, family and social life – were strongly felt by the young people we surveyed and interviewed, fuelling a widespread sense of uncertainty and, for many, emotional ill-being. Next, we turn to consider the longer-term impacts for youth transitions, drawing on our own and others' research.

PRESSURE TO COME: Youth transitions and labour market 'scarring' in 'post-pandemic' times

> …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 (Evans et al, 2001: 25, our emphasis).

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Young People

> "…this is going to be in our lives for such a long time." (22-25 years, female, survey).

5.1 Young people, recession and the future

In exploring the sociological implications of the pandemic for young people, the concept of 'bounded agency' reminds us to examine how pressures now build on top of pressures before and shape pressures to come.

A good example of this relates to mental health. Prior to the pandemic there was already rising rates of anxiety, self-harm and suicidal behaviour amongst young people (John, 2021), and young people 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 or abuse) 'store up problems for the future' and are 'associated with later onset of mental health problems' (ibid: 34-5). This is true for early experiences of unemployment; they can generate psychological stress – anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts – that can persist into middle age (ibid.). Thus far, this research has shown that disruptions to key aspects of the youth transition phase – education, employment, family and social life – were strongly felt by the young people we surveyed and interviewed, fuelling a widespread sense of uncertainty and, for many, psychological ill-being. In the next pages, we look more directly at the longer-term impacts of the pandemic on youth transitions.

One of the central claims of the field of Youth Studies is that it is well placed to scrutinise this key life phase for signs of social change or social continuity; what is happening in the life-worlds and transitions of young people – and the structure of opportunities available to them – can tell us much about social change in general (MacDonald, 2011). Arguably, the crisis and upheaval of the pandemic has made this even more so. Indeed, the sheer extent of the damage to the UK economy caused by the pandemic and lockdowns has led one influential Youth Studies scholar to wonder whether we will need to understand youth transitions pre and post-COVID-19 (Roberts, 2020).

There is some support for such a radical perspective. For instance, Palmer and Small (2021) note that 'though the COVID-19 pandemic is not the first global crisis to be faced, the scale and duration of health and economic impacts differentiate it from prior global crises such as Ebola and the Great Recession'. The ILO have described it as a 'far deeper and more global downturn than witnessed in 2009' with, for example, working hours lost in 2020 being four times greater (ILO, 2021b: 2). In 2020, the UK economy suffered its biggest decline in 300 years (a drop of 9.9%); a far worse fall than occurred with the GFC of 2009 (The Financial Times, 2021).

Thus, in 2020, young people encountered a collapsing labour market. As noted earlier, we know that, typically, when general unemployment rises youth unemployment rises faster. Recession spells particular difficulties for younger people because:

- those seeking their first jobs confront a tightening labour market;

- young workers are usually cheaper to fire or make redundant than older ones;

- employers seeking to shed labour can operate with 'last in, first out' policies to reduce redundancy costs, thus disadvantaging younger employees;

- they are less likely to be Trade Union members and have associated protections;

- they may not have yet 'earned' specific, time-related employment rights;

- they may not have yet acquired the skills and competencies that employers value.

Young workers are also more likely to be in less regulated or less protected labour market sectors, and to also be in non-standard forms of employment which are inherently less secure. One reason why this recession may not be typical of those of earlier decades is because we have seen a growing trend towards precarious work, most evident amongst younger workers. The so-called 'gig economy' contains a range of non-standard forms of work – temporary employment, part-time jobs, 'zero-hours' contracted labour, 'forced' or 'bogus self-employment', etc – all of which tend to be typified by insecurity of work and income and degraded employment conditions (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019). Insecurity of work has now become a defining feature of the labour market for many young adults.

5.2 Youth transitions and post-pandemic labour market 'scarring'

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 or working in jobs below one's education and skill level can 'damage' the prospects of young adults with even a modest recession potentially having serious negative implications for the earning potential of young job-seekers (Schwandt and von Wachter, 2019).

As the ILO notes (2021: 14) however, the impact of this recession on young people's educational pathways and labour market engagement has been 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 long-terms effects that are more severe and long-lasting as well. Less often discussed is the fact that some young workers, in their mid to late twenties, will have faced the double misfortune of the post-GFC recession and the COVID-19 recession (Bosley et al, 2020).

Applying econometric modelling based on data from the post-2008 recession, the Resolution Foundation (2020b: 4) suggest that 'the unique nature of the current crisis' poses the risk of significant scarring in terms of future employment and pay: it has 'damaged the first rung on the employment ladder for a substantial proportion of education leavers… it is unclear when, and to what extent, these sectors [such as hospitality and retail] will recover'. They predict 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 COVID-19 Pandemic and Young People

The British Academy's (2021: 82) expert review of evidence also points to how disruption from lockdowns to normal social life and to young people's education is likely to have lasting and 'significant adverse effects' on educational and employment outcomes, 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', according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies an average life-time loss of around £40,000 (IFS, 2021a). Indeed, Sir Kevan Collins resigned his position as the UK government's 'education recovery commissioner' because the government funds set aside for this task were, in his view, 'feeble' compared with the 'scale of the shock' that 'will go with' young people (The Guardian, 2021c).

Despite the substantial labour market upheaval experienced by young people, there have not yet been significant rises in deprivation or poverty levels for this age group (IFS, 2021b). This is in part because of the benefits of the government's furlough scheme. During the pandemic the proportion of 19-to-24-year olds who were not working any hours per week, including those who were furloughed, rose by 25 per cent (or 400,000) between the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2021; a far greater rise than seen by older age groups. Yet there was only a rise of 50,000 young adults with no job at all during this period, demonstrating the beneficial effect of the furlough scheme (ibid.).

5.3 Young people, inequality and social mobility

Reflecting current thinking in Youth Studies (e.g. France and Roberts, 2017), the pandemic has raised questions about inequalities between young people as well as between generations. We have noted how the unusual nature of the COVID-19 recession could potentially have long-term impacts for a generation of young people. Indeed, the British Academy warns of the risk of a significant impact on generational inequalities 'as the ripple effects are seen in housing, security, health, social opportunities and relationships' (2021: 30).

In a similar vein, the UK's Centre for Economic Performance (2020) describes the under-25 age group as the 'Covid generation', warning 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'.

Obviously, there are also inequalities between young people, not just between younger people and older people, with the IFS (2021) talking of the huge social disparities in the effects of the pandemic and the British Academy (2021: 82) warning of the potential for the pandemic to 'entrench aspects of existing inequality'. One aspect of this is – in the context of collapsed youth employment – young people with lower levels of skill or qualifications will not be able to compensate for this by gaining labour market experience (ibid.).

The COVID-19 Pandemic and Young People

More generally, young people from more financially well-off families will have been shielded from the effects of the pandemic to a greater extent than has been the case for young people from less well-off families. We noted above how, overall, the furlough scheme had had a positive effect in protecting young people from significant rises in poverty and deprivation. Another significant factor here, however, is the role that families play in supporting young adults. Many young adults live with their parents (up to over 70 per cent if we include 'returned home' students), and this helped to shield them from the harshest effects of the pandemic (ibid.). One of our survey respondents commented: 'thank goodness my parents are fine with waiving rent for now because I cannot make any money!'. Another said that job loss meant that she 'had to move back home due to money problems'.

The ability or otherwise of families to offer this sort of support reflects, of course, well-known class inequalities. Some young people are much more able than others to rely on parents for material support. The effects of the pandemic added to the pressures on families – particularly low-income families – thus adding to inequalities in youth experience (CPAG, 2020). We have, then, a pandemic recession that has been particularly disadvantageous for young people - and even more disadvantageous for those who already carry the social class disadvantage of lower levels of education and qualification, lower individual and family income and wealth, poorer quality housing, fewer material resources in the home, less living space and privacy, no access to a garden and so on.

Plotting the course of the pandemic – and knowing its multiple social, economic and health effects – Is fraught with difficulty. In the UK, even during the period of writing this paper, we have had so-called 'Freedom Day' (19th July 2021) with the whole-scale release of restrictions[3] followed, less than six months later, by the reintroduction of some preventative measures, exponentially rising infection rates and threats to public health systems that outstripped the first wave (The Guardian, 2021e). By the end of 2021, the UK was having a strong economic recovery with record levels of job vacancies and falling youth unemployment (ONS, 2021b)[4]. Young people's employment has recovered more quickly than has that of the over 50s, and there has been a trend for young people to find jobs in new industries and/or with new employers (IFS, 2021; 31):

> 'This could reflect greater adaptability in the face of changed circumstances, but it could also signify greater disruption to their careers, with long-run consequences for their earnings and progression. What remains unknown is the impact on skills and willingness to work of prolonged periods out of the labour force'.

Thus, there are uncertainties in the current situation and complex dynamics between unemployment, education and employment; for instance, we also see lower overall

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[3] A moment when all children and most young people were not fully vaccinated, causing clinical epidemiologist Deepti Gurdasani to warn, on Sky News, of the threat of 'long-Covid' for this young generation.
[4] 1,172,000 - an increase of over one-third of a million compared with the period immediately prior to the pandemic (ONS, 2021b). In November, there was a drop of around fifty thousand in numbers of young people unemployed, compared with the previous quarter (House of Commons Library, 2021b).

employment rates and higher rates of economic inactivity (compared with pre-pandemic levels) (House of Commons Library, 2021b).

Drawing on research for the Youth Futures Foundation (Williams et al, 2021), Goulden (2021) describes how the pre-existing trend towards post-16 education has been accelerated by the pandemic, resulting 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 per cent compared with 43 per cent pre-crisis) (Williams et al, 2021: 2). In other words, the 'recruitment crisis is being driven by a participation one' (Wilson, 2021), with substantial falls in the overall levels of employment and rising economic inactivity (because of a growth in retirement and ill-health), giving the 'tightest jobs market since the 1960s' (ibid.).

The Youth Futures Foundation also warns of long-term labour market scarring for recent education leavers and of 'significant structural inequalities in the labour market for young people' (Williams et al, 2021). For instance, one in twelve of all young people are 'economically inactive' (a figure that has persisted over decades) and there are high rates of long-term unemployment; in both cases, there is overrepresentation of young people with health problems, disabilities or caring responsibilities. Employment inequalities faced by Black and Asian young people have also been made worse by the pandemic. The Youth Futures Foundation research points to how:

> This all comes on top of longstanding trends of underemployment and precarious work among young people as well as job polarisation – the disappearance of middle-income jobs in favour of growth in low- or high-wage work, which impacts on opportunities for progression (Williams et al, 2021: 9).

As the Work Foundation (2021) puts it, 'vacancies are at record levels, but it's not necessarily easier to find a good job'. Recent analysis by the Resolution Foundation (2022) confirms this and other trends noted in this section. They point to the fact that one in three 18-to-24 year olds who had been in jobs on the eve of the pandemic experienced extended periods of worklessness since then, with the potential consequences for scarring that we have discussed here. They also point to the problem of economic inactivity in this age group, and slight rises in this, especially among young men. Worryingly, the Resolution Foundation also finds that one-third of those who had lost work during lockdown had since returned to work on insecure contracts. They also note that 'all of these changes are associated with higher-than-average mental health risks' (ibid).

Optimistic labour market headlines can mask the situation of marginalised young people and, as well, national rates hide regional disparities in worklessness (e.g. with Hartlepool in North East England having twice the national average of young adults claiming Universal Credit) (Williams et al, 2021). There has also been regional inequity in the government's 'Kickstart' scheme, designed to help unemployed young people into jobs. Despite claims that 250,000 jobs would be created, 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, 2021d). As with our study, the Youth Futures Foundation research situates young people's current

prospects in the longer perspective of 'generational progress grinding to a halt' (Williams et al, 2021: 1).

Summary and conclusion: Future research and policy

Less prone to its health risks than older people, young people nonetheless have experienced significant hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in respect of disruption to their education, their transitions to the labour market and their employment. The ILO notes that 'the crisis has been multidimensional in its impacts on young people' (2021: 14) and, in line with other emerging research, our study of the experiences of young people in North East England had the following, six main findings:

- The **pandemic and lockdown(s) impacted heavily on young people's day to day lives and their relationships with family, friends and partners**. Some had improved relationships and fostered new hobbies. Others reported increased pressure and household strain, often connected to lack of space, and they missed friends and girl/boyfriends. Some felt they were floundering; filling and structuring time in endless 'Netflix Days' was a challenge.

- **Education had been severely disrupted**. People worried that their education and qualifications would not be good enough. Uncertainty over the future and the sense they were missing important educational and other milestones and cultural rites of passage ('leaving dos', graduation ceremonies, gap years, 18th birthday parties) fed this anxiety.

- **Young people have faced some of the toughest labour market effects of the pandemic**. Our participants described losing jobs and losing income and sometimes not being eligible for government support (such as the furlough scheme); being able to 'fall back' on family support was important. Regardless of whether they were in work or in education, young people expressed worry and insecurity about their future prospects. The 'COVID recession' was unusually harsh for young people because their employment and education were simultaneously disrupted.

- Very often **young people expressed a sense of emotional and psychological 'ill-being'**; this was the most common single theme to emerge from the survey, and is now a widely reported outcome of the pandemic. It was tied to the pressures they felt being 'stuck in' and 'cut off' at home, to the disruptions to their education and employment and to their sense of uncertainty about the future.

- **Young adults' experiences punctured popular stereotypes.** For example, reflecting a sense of collective social responsibility and a concern to protect loved ones from the risks of the virus, they expressed strong support for lockdown regulations and felt dismayed by the negative way their generation was often portrayed in the media. A second example, is that some of our sample were 'key workers' (e.g. nurses, teachers, delivery drivers, shop workers) countering negative stereotypes often associated with 'youth' during the pandemic.

- The research pointed to **class inequalities in young people's experiences**, tallying with other studies. The quality of educational support was an example and,

> because of their different levels of material and other resources, some families were more able to support young people than others. Commonly reported examples related to computer and Wi-Fi access and space to work or for privacy. Access to gardens and outside space is an under-reported example of youth inequality brought to light by the pandemic.

An initial motivation for our study was the 'structured absence' of young people's views in the explosion of media, political and policy commentary that accompanied the early days of the pandemic in the UK. Others had similar motivations and, around two years later, it is hard to keep up with the burgeoning research on young people and COVID-19! Much of this has been psychologically-focused; our survey and interview findings appear to be generally in line with this (for instance, in showing the extent of the psychological malaise associated with the pandemic).

There has been rather less sociological research and less still has adopted the sort of critical Youth Studies perspective we have followed here[5]. We believe it is important to locate young people's experiences of 'the here and now' of the pandemic – as important as that is – within a longer perspective of the changing situation of youth in the UK. We have argued that the COVID-19 crisis has added to the crisis young people were already facing by the end of the first two decades of the 21st century – poverty and deprivation, austerity cuts to services and welfare entitlements, underemployment and widespread precarity, job insecurity, the costs and diminishing returns of university, the 'impossibility' of the housing market, falling social mobility and so on – making transitions to adulthood even more precarious.

Middle-aged social commentators and politicians talk of 'getting back to normal' in 'a post-COVID world' but this seems hollow – and ignorant of the deep problems that were already facing youth in transition. Indeed, 'getting back to normal' 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) are unobtainable for the majority of young people. Beck's The Risk Society (1992) was influential in Youth Studies because it seemed to capture this new condition of unpredictability and risk, where traditional social scripts had less purchase for young people and where standardised transitions to adulthood began to dissipate.

With the massive global social, economic and physical risks of the COVID-19 years, it might be that older age groups too have felt the force of this new 'Risk Society' (see Horton, 2020). In other words, the current generation of young people have not yet had the opportunity to establish a 'normal' – unless we understand their normality to be one of flux, uncertainty and disappearing opportunity. For them, the future 'normality' will be set in, and determined by, the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our argument, then, is that if we are to weigh up the significance of the pandemic on young people it is necessary to look backwards, pre-pandemic, and to look forward to the futures that young people will face, and how these may have been

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[5] The recent special issue of the journal 'Young', about COVID-19, is an exception (vol 29(4) 2021).

altered by COVID-19 and associated lockdowns. Critical here is an understanding of the structure of labour market opportunities that 'scaffold' youth transitions to adulthood (Roberts, 2009; MacDonald, 2011).

Cogent evidence from national and international research points to the heavy pressures that are to come for young people including the likely 'scarring' effects of the loss of education, of employment, of earnings, and of labour market experience. The ILO (2021: 2) concluded that the crisis has been particularly severe for youth across three dimensions: (1) disruptions to education, training and work-based learning; (2) increased difficulties for young jobseekers and new labour market entrants; and (3) job and income losses, along with deteriorating quality of employment. It is difficult to conclude other than that this scarring will add to intergenerational inequalities, increase the precarity that young people already experience and sharpen inequalities between young people.

Given this, what might be the priorities for research on young people and for social policy?

6.1 Research agenda

In terms of a research agenda, there is an obvious need to track the outcomes of the pandemic for young people (e.g. in respect of mental health and labour market scarring). Important here will be assessing the effectiveness of government policy interventions and decisions on the fortunes of young people (e.g. such as the termination of the furlough scheme and the temporary 'uplift' to Universal Credit). Clearly there is complexity in the patterns of unemployment, employment, economic inactivity and educational participation that we described above.

It is important to try to 'get behind' some of these statistical trends in order to properly understand – from young people's perspective – the decisions they make when faced with this 'post-pandemic' opportunity structure and the sorts of experiences and outcomes they lead to. For instance, how can we best explain substantial levels of economic inactivity? What are young people's experiences of a tight labour market? Are young people better able to choose between employment and education options in such a context?

Next, as indicated, we are still to fully comprehend the unequal experience of the pandemic and its outcomes – either between the generations or between young adults. This would seem to be prime territory in which to progress thinking in Youth Studies about the balance of inter-generational ('youth as generation') versus intra-generational inequalities (e.g. by class) (see Woodman and Wyn, 2015; France and Roberts, 2017). It seems to us that here the social policy concept of 'the welfare mix' could be useful. Antonucci (2016) has demonstrated how we can investigate youth inequalities in terms of the differential resources that are available to them from the labour market (e.g. from wages), the family (e.g. extended care), and the state (e.g. social welfare benefits).

In broad terms, during the pandemic it would appear that many young adults in the UK have had their labour market income reduced or cut altogether. For many, state welfare assistance temporarily increased (via the furlough scheme and Universal

Credit); an unusual temporary reverse to the trend of the previous austerity decade. Again, for many but not all, families have been an important 'back stop' (e.g. accommodating students returning 'home' from university or providing home schooling). 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 inequalities, nor how they will affect the longer-term social welfare of young people

6.2 Social policy agenda

In terms of social policy, there is a strong case for urgent policy action to limit the future negative consequences for young adults, particularly those regarded as 'vulnerable' (ILO,2021b: 14). Palmer and Small (2021) review how the pandemic has, in four OECD countries, 'amplified economic instability and health risks' for socio-economically marginalised young people.

Consequently, 'governments must invest in social safety net programmes that focus on supporting those most at-risk'. Palmer and Small (2021) argue that interventions should have a strong focus on job creation, education and training, and paid work experience, together with 'investments in early childhood care and education, housing, health and mental health care' to 'offset the pandemic's effects' and to help remedy some of the inequalities faced by this group. In a similar vein, the ILO (2021b) notes that economic recovery is fragile and that steps must be taken to 'prevent short-term [labour market] exit turning into long-term exclusion for a generation of young people'.

Stressing the intersection of inequalities in youth, they emphasise recovery strategies that make good quality jobs for youth 'a key objective', with priority given to 'vulnerable' young people (e.g. including employment and entrepreneurship opportunities; training and education (re)engagement to remedy 'learning loss'; extending social protection and welfare; improving rights and 'voice') (ILO, 2021: 14). The charity Young Citizens UK (2021) goes even further and talks of 'a youth-led recovery' – another theme for forthcoming research. As we have shown, our own interviews with young people and with youth work practitioners signal the lively engagement of young people in 'the politics of the pandemic'.

The ILO's emphasis on youth inequalities and the needs of the most 'vulnerable' is given local detail by the UK's National Youth Agency (2021: 4), who argue for the value of youth work in supporting, for instance, those who live in areas of high deprivation, in rural and remote areas, or who have complex needs:

> Without a fundamental change in how we support young people, far too many will be left behind. We must learn lessons from the 1980s recession which wrote off a generation of young people…to mass unemployment…and to training schemes, with little or no hope of employment at the end. That left whole communities scarred, widening inequalities which can still be traced today. Overall there needs to be significant investment in job creation, enterprise and, crucially, youth services.

In sum, there is strong consensus amongst policy analysts, NGOs, youth charities and youth researchers, in the UK and more widely, that very substantial labour market and social policy intervention is required if the impacts of the pandemic on young people are to be ameliorated. This is even more pressing if we understand the extensive inter-and intra-generational inequalities young adults in the UK were already facing, and the enormous difficulties many had in achieving secure and rewarding education, employment and housing transitions.

In contrast with much of Europe, successive UK governments have failed to develop a coherent and concerted youth policy (that goes beyond the fetish of 'the NEET problem') (Coles, 2002; King, 2016). Potentially, the pressures of the pandemic could be the spur for a new youth policy agenda that puts the social welfare of all young adults at its heart (Fahmy et al, 2020).

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Appendices

Appendix A

Durham University

Young People in the North East Under Lockdown

Page 1: Who we are and what we will do with your information

Who we are

We are University researchers collecting young people's accounts of the current COVID-19/ Coronavirus crisis.

If you are aged between *14 and 30 years and live in the North East of England*, we would really like to hear from you. Participating in our survey is *anonymous* and completely *voluntary*. The survey is just three pages long and takes about 5-10 minutes.

What we will do with what you tell us

The information you give us will be made available to public authorities and community bodies who are trying to help young people, as well as being used for research purposes.

If you consent to participating and for us to use the information in this way, please click NEXT

Research team: Hannah King (Department of Sociology, Durham), Emma Murphy (School of Government and International Affairs, Durham), Rob MacDonald (School of Education and Professional Development, Huddersfield)

1 / 8

Page 2: First we need to ask some basic questions so we can be sure we are getting a good range of young people taking part and so we can see how experiences of the lockdown might be different depending on your background

If you don't want to answer a question you don't have to.

1. What is your age?

- ○ 14-16
- ○ 17-18
- ○ 19-21
- ○ 22-25
- ○ 26-30

2. What is your gender?

- ○ Female
- ○ Male
- ○ Other

2.a. If you selected Other, please specify:

3. What is your ethnic group / background?

○ White

○ Mixed / Multiple Ethnic Groups

○ Asian / Asian British

○ Black / African / Caribbean / Black British

○ Other ethnic group

3.a. If you would like to add more detail please do so here:

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4. What is the postcode of the house you are living in now? (this helps us see if we are getting responses from across the North East region)

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5. What is your highest level of qualification?

○ No qualifications

○ GCSEs / BTEC Firsts / Level 2

○ A Levels / BTEC Nationals / Level 3 / IB

○ Undergraduate degree

○ Postgraduate degree

○ Other

5.a. If you selected Other, please give details here:

6. Before the current crisis, what was your *main* activity?

☐ School

☐ Full-time sixth form or college

☐ Apprenticeship or work placement

☐ University student

☐ Full-time job

☐ One or more part-time jobs

☐ Self-employed

☐ Unpaid carer or home maker

☐ Unemployed

7. Who are you living with now (i.e. during Lockdown)? Please select all that apply.

☐ Living with parents/guardian/carer

☐ Living on your own

☐ Living with friends

☐ Living with partner

☐ Living with children

☐ Other / "It's more complicated"

7.a. If you selected Other / "It's more complicated", please give details here:

Page 3: Over to you

What has life been like for you under the COVID-19/Coronavirus crisis? Please tell us about how the crisis and lockdown are affecting you, positively and negatively. This could include:

- Typical daily activities
- Your thoughts and feelings
- Your education or job
- Your family, housing and financial situation
- Relationships with family, friends, partner

8. You can write as much or as little as you would like.

Page 4: If you have more to say...

9. We are interested in following up this quick survey by talking directly to young people in the North East. If you would be *interested in talking to us more*, or making a short video or audio diary for us, please tick 'yes' below.

○ Yes

○ No

9.a. If you said YES and would like us to contact you directly, please provide us with your email address if you have one.

> [   ]

9.b. If you said YES and would like us to contact you directly, please provide us with your mobile phone number if you have one.

> [   ]

Page 5: THANK YOU for participating in our survey.

Please share it with your friends and encourage them to complete it:

https://durham.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/youthunderlockdown

If you need to, you can contact us here:

YouthUnderLockdown.survey@durham.ac.uk

If the current COVID-19 / Coronavirus crisis and the lockdown are particularly difficult for you or you do not feel safe, the following sources of support may be helpful. All telephone numbers are free to call:

Childline (someone to talk to) - telephone 0800 1111

Samaritans (someone to talk to) - telephone 116 123

Mind (mental health support) - telephone 0300 123 3393

Refuge (domestic abuse helpline for women and children) - telephone 0808 2000 247

Citizens Advice (advice service) - telephone 03444111444

Turn 2 Us (support for people in financial need)

Police - telephone 999 for emergencies or 101 if it is urgent

You can also contact your local Council.

About the author(s)

Robert MacDonald

Robert is Professor of Education and Social Justice at the University of Huddersfield, UK. He is also Visiting Professor at the Danish Centre for Youth Research, Aalborg University and Visiting Fellow at the Department of Sociology and Social Policy, Nottingham University. He previously worked and studied at the universities of Durham and York, and was Professor of Sociology at Teesside University from 2002-2017, where he worked with colleagues to develop the internationally renowned Teesside Studies of Youth Transitions and Social Exclusion. He also is co-editor in chief of the Journal of Youth Studies.

Hannah King

Hannah is an Associate Professor of Criminology at the Department of Sociology at Durham University, UK. She draws upon her previous policy and youth work practice expertise within her teaching and research, particularly through participatory, co-production and creative research methods. Her research is focused in the areas of youth transitions to adulthood, young people's experiences of marginalisation and youth policy; domestic and sexual violence; and women in prison. She is an Editor for the journal YOUNG and a member of the Editorial Board of the Journal of Youth Studies. Hannah is also Co-Director of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme at Durham University.

Emma Murphy

Emma is Professor of Political Economy in the School of Government and International Affairs at Durham University. She is also a Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Political Science, University of Tübingen and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and the Academy of Social Sciences. Her research has focused principally on the Middle East and North Africa, addressing diverse aspects of the region's political economy including gender politics, political and economic reform, and the impact of information and communications technologies. Since the 2011 Arab uprisings, she has focused on issues of youth marginalisation, generational identity, and youth policy, expanding her geographical coverage to include comparative southern European youth and EU youth policy. Most recently she has been a co-investigator on a large GCRF-funded project researching young women's experiences of the transport sector in urban Africa.

Wendy Gill

Wendy is currently a PhD student at Durham University researching the importance of youth work values in organisational stability. She is employed at Sunderland University teaching on undergraduate and post graduate modules of Youth and Community Studies and Social Work courses. Wendy has over 25 years' experience in the field of Community and Youth Work in the North East of England, with experience of working in public and voluntary sectors as well as in management and face to face roles. Her areas of interest are linked to the values and principles

underpinning the process of Youth Work, young people's agency and voice, community action, social justice, and creative research especially linked to participatory action research. Wendy holds Associative fellow status of the HE Academy.