

People, Place and Policy (2020): 14/2, pp. 85-89. DOI: 10.3351/ppp.2020.6752799995

## *Editorial*

# PPP Special Issue – Contemporary Youth: Precarity, Resistance and (Re)Imagined Futures

Chris Devany,<sup>1</sup> Adam Formby,<sup>2\*</sup> Jennifer Hoolachan<sup>3</sup> and Kim McKee<sup>4</sup>

1 Sheffield Hallam University

2 York St John University

3 Cardiff University

4 University of Stirling

---

In recent years, the association between youth and precarity has become increasingly strengthened. Most commonly, youth precarity has been linked to the labour market (Shildrick et al., 2010; Crisp and Powell, 2017; Formby, 2017) and the housing market (McKee et al., 2020) although other social strata such as precarity of place (Banki, 2013) and precarious leisure (Batchelor et al., 2020) have also received attention. Deindustrialisation, forceful neoliberal politics, the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2008, austerity measures and, most likely now, the social and economic costs of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic have accelerated academic attention on young people with concern over how they are faring amid a complex web of unpredictable and insecure social structures and what consequences these will have for their futures.

The recent upsurge of 'precarity' in youth literature has led some to interrogate its meaning (e.g. France, 2016). Millar (2017) poses several questions to assist a critical analysis of precarity:

*How new is precarity? Or perhaps the better question is “for whom is precarity new?” Moreover, what does precarity specifically reference? A labor [sic] condition, a class identity, an ontological experience of human existence, a generalized [sic] state of the world today? (p. 2)*

Millar scrutinises 'precarity' by outlining three of the most prominent academic contributors to the concept: Pierre Bourdieu (1998), who conceived of precarity as a labour condition; Guy Standing (2011) whose concept of the 'precarariat' describes a new social class; and Judith Butler (2004) for whom precarity is an ontological experience. This led Millar (2017) to conclude that precarity is defined by a back-and-forth relationship between unstable, insecure market conditions and the impact of these on people's lives.

Discussions of youth precarity have come to be shaped by the critical juncture of the 2008 GFC, which resulted in a sharp rise in youth un- and under-employment, an expansion of education and training, a housing crisis which prevented many from leaving the parental home or buying their first home, and a raft of public service cuts and austerity measures (McKee, 2012; France, 2016). In the years since 2008, insecure, zero-hours, casual and fixed-term work contracts are significantly more commonplace than they previously were (Hardgrove et al., 2015; Furlong et al., 2017) and the private rented housing sector, with its time-limited tenancy agreements, has dramatically grown (Kemp, 2015). Yet as several of the papers in this Special Issue note, precarity is typically traced back to the late 1970s which marked the beginning of a significant period in recent history in which neoliberal and free-market politics took hold. Deindustrialisation and labour market deregulation in the decades that followed paved the way for private companies to thrive (France, 2016) and were married with the push towards homeownership aspirations, while social housing was deliberately eroded (Crawford and McKee, 2018). Socioeconomic inequalities grew, with working-class families finding themselves pushed further towards the poverty line (Hills, 2017).

Whilst precarity can be seen across the life-course, young people – particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds – have typically felt the effects more acutely than other age groups. The late Andy Furlong was a pivotal figure in mapping the impact of changing labour market and Higher Education conditions on young people. Notably, while he consistently highlighted the significance of social class in determining young people's differentiated experiences of changing structures, his later work highlighted that in the post-2008 GFC era, precarity also extends to non-working-class university graduates (Furlong, 2015). Within housing studies, the phenomenon of 'Generation Rent' highlights that many young people are struggling to make the move from the parental home into their own home which is affordable and provides security. This has resulted in many remaining in the parental home for longer than anticipated or moving into the private rental sector which is often characterised by short-term tenancy agreements, high rents and poor conditions (Hoolachan et al., 2017). Crucially, though, structures such as labour and housing markets are closely intertwined, producing a web of precarity in which many young people need to navigate the stress of not knowing when their next payday will be, how they will pay for their living costs and how they will move towards a more stable future (McKee et al., 2020).

Due to the impact of COVID-19, many of the themes present in this Special Issue are ever more pertinent as young people face a new wave of precarity and challenging futures. Analysis from the Office for National Statistics has emphasised the direct impact that COVID-19 lockdown measures have had on young people's mental health – especially noting concerns around schools and universities, work, well-being and household finances (ONS, 2020). Specifically, as with many of the developments put forward in this Special Issue, there are concerns around existing socio-economic inequalities. COVID-19 will be 'likely to have a particularly pernicious impact on the estimated four million children and young people already living in poverty in the UK' such as lost educational support, increased social isolation (due to school closures) and increased costs of living as a result of reduced household incomes (The Children's Society, 2020: 2). For young people entering into the labour market, early analysis by Dias et al (2020) has emphasised the likely impact of COVID-19 on career prospects, especially those present in low-paying occupations threatened as a result of the pandemic. They note that COVID-19 has 'severely dented the career prospects of young people and threatens to have a prolonged negative economic impact on them as a result' (Dias et al., 2020: 2). These developments, of course, echo the disruption to children and young people's lives that occurred due to the 2008 GFC. Indeed, the impact of COVID-19 will both intensify the need to support young people in both their working and

personal lives, as well as entirely new emergent challenges tied to the unique pressures the pandemic presents.

There is, therefore, a need to reflect on the substantive challenges that young people have faced, and continue to face, as a consequence of the twinned crises of the 2008 GFC (and long economic recovery) and the COVID-19 pandemic. Policy makers need to reflect on the realities and challenges of young people's lives – and frame support accordingly and appropriately. In this Special Issue, Ralston and Formby articulate some of these challenges through analysing the occupational structure of the youth labour market; comparing the occupational position of young people before the 2008 GFC with their situation ten years later. Sociological evidence indicates that occupation is one of the most powerful general indicators of life chances, social and material reward, and status (Connelly et al., 2016), yet less attention has been paid to the issue of occupational position and whether there have been measurable shifts in the relative advantage (and disadvantage) of youth work. This article focuses on regional and gendered patterns in the changing occupational position of young people, emphasising that the elimination of young people from occupations that had previously employed them is a deep lying concern. It counters past governmental claims of a 'successful' and 'thriving' youth labour market through showing the extent of what has been lost since 2008.

The work of Cartwright in this issue also looks to deepen and further debates around labour market inequality and offers a prescient analysis of young people's experiences and perceptions of work after the 2008 GFC. Based on interviews with young temporary workers in 2012, the paper examines the divergent opportunities and limitations offered by temporary work that can both be enabling through supporting long-term goals but disabling in terms of long-term commitments associated with reaching adulthood. Over time, young people can feel they are in a 'perpetual present' of a suspended adulthood and they are powerless in shaping their overall trajectories into work. Indeed, as COVID-19 threatens to create further disadvantage in the youth labour market, there is a concern that an entirely new generation of young people will face the same sense of lost opportunity, powerlessness and 'perpetual present' that others have before them.

This issue also considers the seemingly intractable problems emanating from an increasingly precarious and insecure housing market. The prescient and timely contributions from Watt, and Meers and Hunter, address two distinct, yet interconnected issues experienced by young people at the lower end of the private rental sector. The former provides a nuanced and critical view on the oft simplistic characterisation of 'Generation Rent'. Drawing upon research from London and the south-East, Watt shows how the linkages between homelessness, precarious employment and poverty not only exclude working-class young people from homeownership, but also from the private rental sector. Furthermore, the high rents and a decade of welfare austerity have coerced young working-class people into housing tenures that they know to be unsustainable. The paper calls upon policy makers to examine the inter-connectivity of youth homelessness and the private rental sector and a reform of tenants' rights to provide greater housing security.

Meers and Hunter shed light upon the under-researched matter of 'property guardianship' in the UK. The paper examines how guardianship advertisements are marketed as a distinct form of renting to appeal to young people who are financially excluded from the private rental sector. Meers and Hunter suggest that the advertisements present 'guardianship' as a mutually beneficial arrangement between landlord and tenant, the paper argues that the expectation of 'guardianship' is often detached from the reality of being a 'guardian'. It also suggests that the private rental sector has sought to use 'property guardianship' to solve problems of precariousness by generating an even more precarious form of accommodation. The paper concludes by

outlining the need for policy makers to interrogate the claims made in these advertisements and the practices of landlords in this subsector of the housing market.

The work of Elliott et al presents the ways that young people in Merthyr Tydfil (South Wales) resisted against intersecting forms of stigmatisation. Using a place-based lens and Wacquant's (2008) concept of 'territorial stigmatisation', the paper depicts how young people engaged in grassroots activism to reimagine their futures to seek positive change. The authors argue that community anchor organisations are key to harnessing youth activism in the pursuit of positive change in post-industrial areas. Finally, Johnson presents an ethnographic study on the 'imagined futures' of young working-class people within an Alternative Provision educational setting. The article highlights the centrality of the body on their educational experiences and details the ways that they acquired capital to reshape their habitus. It also details the challenges faced by young disabled people in their unpredictable and difficult transitions into paid work. The paper concludes by debating the pitfalls of Alternative Provision within Further Education and calls upon policy makers to create new pathways that acknowledge both class and disability.

Together this collection of papers detail some of the most significant challenges faced by young people in the shadow of the 2008 GFC. As we embark upon the socio-economic restructuring resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic the empirical findings presented in this Special Issue will prove to be more valuable than ever. The policy recommendations for the labour market, housing, 'territorial stigmatisation' and Alternative Provision within Further Education must be at the core of future discussions to ensure that the concerns of young people are reflected in policy discourses. The valuable contributions from each paper make this Special Issue essential reading for all who research and develop approaches to support young people.

To conclude, we wish to extend our gratitude to all who have contributed to the delivery of this Special Issue. Special mention is made to the editors of 'People, Place and Policy' for providing the opportunity to shape this issue around our shared interests of contemporary youth. We urge readers of this issue to continue policy debates on the socio-economic position of young people at this pressing time.

\*Corresponding address: Adam Formby, York Business School York St John University, Lord Mayor's Walk, York, YO31 7EX. Email: [a.formby@yorks.ac.uk](mailto:a.formby@yorks.ac.uk)

## References

- Banki, S. (2013) Precarity of place: A complement to the growing precariat literature. *Global Discourse*, 3, 3-4, 450–463.
- Batchelor, S., Fraser, A., Whittaker, L. and Li, L. (2020) Precarious leisure: (Re)imagining youth, transitions and temporality. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23, 1, 93-108.
- Bourdieu, P. (1998) *Acts of resistance: Against the tyranny of the market*. New York: The New Press.
- Butler, J. (2004) *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. London: Verso.
- Connelly, R., Gayle, V. and Lambert, P. S. (2016) A Review of occupation-based social classifications for social survey research. *Methodological Innovations*, 9, 1-14.
- Crawford, J. and McKee, K. (2018) Hysteresis: understanding the housing aspirations gap. *Sociology*, 52, 1, 182-197.
- Crisp, R. and Powell, R. (2017) Young people and UK labour market policy: A critique of 'employability' as a tool for understanding youth unemployment. *Urban Studies*, 54, 8, 1784-1807.
- Dias, M. C., Joyce, R. and Keiller, A. N. (2020) *COVID-19 and the career prospects of young people*. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS).

- Formby, A. (2017) 'Got a degree...all of a sudden I'm in a Job Centre': The role of 'stigma' in 'precarious' graduate transitions. *Poverty and Social Justice*, 25, 3, 249-262.
- France, A. (2016) *Understanding youth in the Global Economic Crisis*. Bristol: Polity Press.
- Furlong, A. (2015) Unemployment, insecurity and poor work: Young adults in the new economy. In: J. Wyn and H. Cahill (eds) *Handbook of Children and Youth Studies*, 531–542. Singapore: Springer.
- Furlong, A., Goodwin, J., O'Connor, H., Hadfield, S., Hall, S., Lowden, K. and Plugor, R. (2017) *Young people in the labour market: Past, present, future*. Routledge.
- Hardgrove, A., McDowell, L. and Rootham, E. (2015) Precarious lives, precarious labour: Family support and young men's transitions to work in the UK. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 18, 8, 1057-76.
- Hills, J. (2017) *Good Times, Bad Times (revised Edition): The Welfare Myth of Them and Us*. Policy Press.
- Hoolachan, J., McKee, K., Moore, T. and Soaita, A. (2017) 'Generation Rent' and the ability to 'settle down': economic and geographical variation in young people's housing transitions. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20, 1, 63-78.
- Kemp, P. (2015) Private renting after the Global Financial Crisis. *Housing Studies*, 30, 4, 601-620.
- McKee, K., Soaita, A.M. and Hoolachan, J. (2020) 'Generation rent' and the Emotions of Private Renting: self-worth, status and insecurity amongst low-income renters. *Housing Studies*, 35, 8, 1468-1487.
- McKee, K. (2012) Young people, homeownership and future welfare. *Housing Studies*, 27, 853–862.
- Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2020) 'Coronavirus and the social impacts on young people in Great Britain: 3 April to 10 May 2020' <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/ageing/articles/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsonyoungpeopleingreatbritain/3aprilto10may2020> [Accessed: 22/08/2020].
- Shildrick, T., MacDonald, R., Webster, C. and Garthwaite, K. (2010) *The low-pay, no-pay cycle*. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
- Standing, G. (2011) *The precariat: The new dangerous class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Wacquant, L. (2008) Territorial stigmatization in the age of advanced marginality. In: Wacquant, L. (ed) *Symbolic Power in Cultural Contexts*. Brill Sense: 43-52.