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## An Injustice of Youth: The Social Harm and Marginalisation of Young People in the UK

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### Introduction

Austerity measures in the UK have re-shaped and diminished many of the domains of welfare that comprise the 'youth welfare state'. The impact of prolonged austerity (since 2010) has continually impacted the efficacy and range of social policy responses in areas such as youth justice, youth work, welfare and support, housing, health and education. As a result: contemporary youth is experiencing generational social harm and significant social othering – often whilst being denied voice in the society they live in resulting in new forms of social (in)justice as a result. Moreover, these developments have worsened due to the Covid-19 epidemic (which has further decreased living standards for all young people), prompting concerns about the marginalisation of young people from relevant social and political structures. Negative portrayals of young people framed around 'irresponsibility' and 'risky behaviors' contradict evidence that demonstrates the opposite: as many young people seek to volunteer and support others whilst experienced significant forms of social harm. As a result, contemporary global youth are currently experiencing generational social harm(s) and social othering whilst often being denied a voice in the societies they live in. If truth be told, the youth of today are experiencing new forms of social injustice and, to add insult to injury, these developments have become worse as the Covid-19 epidemic has persistently decreased living standards for many young people around the world.

This chapter examines to what extent the youth welfare state has been pushed back; reflecting on emergent forms of social harm, 'othering' and marginalisation. It will reflect on some of the prolonged impact of Covid-19 and how we can support young people in future through increased forms of social justice based provision. It will

include several case studies that exemplify the how the youth welfare state has become smaller: focusing on three core areas 'youth-welfare-to-work policy', and 'environmental inequalities' (particularly young people's access to green space). Specifically, these have been selected because they exemplify the significant problems that emerge when the youth welfare state is compromised through different forms of social harm (Dorling et al, 2008). Furthermore, the chapter will argue that new forms of injustice are emerging in light of recent retrenchment in the youth welfare state and recommend several social justice-framed solutions. What is perhaps concerning here is that this will lead to further groups of young people being overlooked from future policy frameworks due to the overlooked nature of contemporary social harm.

### A Diminishing Youth Welfare State?

It is no secret that young people are becoming increasingly marginalised across the world and are often experiencing generational forms of injustice through the failures of government and society that fails to acknowledge their vulnerabilities and provide appropriate support. The framing of 'youth welfare' is often framed through distinctive arguments about 'vulnerability', 'need' and the overall framing of 'youth' as a dynamic and complex social construction involving a 'blurring of boundaries between youth and adulthood' (Reisinger, 2012: 96) and the de-standardisation of modern life. Modern understandings of youth stress that 'youth' has become nonlinear and complex and repeatedly is a site of uncertainty and change. As Kelly and Munro argue:

*while young people may now be – or at least may feel themselves to be – less constrained by social divisions such as class, gender, ethnicity or religion when making choices about their future, transitions to 'adulthood' have also become more varied, protracted and precarious. Social markers such as leaving home are increasingly decoupled from chronological age, as many young adults struggle to obtain secure employment with pay sufficient to meet rising housing costs (Kelly and Munro, 2020).*

This presents an interesting challenge for modern welfare states in that notions of social risk (Taylor-Gooby, 2004) continuously shift and move. This is why for many scholars and policy makers, the analysis of 'youth' as a period of social change is integral because it allows an analysis of wider societal trends and observations – and the introduction of emergent vulnerabilities and dynamics that impact other vulnerable groups:

*'The youth phase allows a privileged vantage point from which to observe broader processes of social change and, as such, to answer questions of wider relevance for sociology. If new social trends emerge it is feasible that they will be seen here first or most obviously, among the coming, new generation of young adults'* (MacDonald, 2011: 428).

Furthermore, a notions of the youth welfare state involves discussion regarding how young people experience a variety of social harms and inequalities across many distinctive policy domains: for instance, in relation to youth justice and criminalisation, youth work, welfare and support, housing, health and education, environmental inequalities (e.g. access to greenspace), employment and education. More disturbingly, the onset (and continuation) of global austerity has continued to reshape and diminish youth welfare policy even further. The dual impact of the 2008 global recession and Covid-19 continues to impact upon the efficacy and range of social policy responses in terms of youth-based provision and its availability, with some areas of social policy (in the UK, at least), obtaining more public resources than others. Yet overall, youth-based provisions has seen a dramatic decrease in terms of support (YMCA, 2020).

The deeper rationale behind these changes reflects a landscape of deeper inequalities that are impacting young people in different ways. Recent analysis points towards increased in deeper forms of poverty impacting underrepresented communities and groups such as children and young people: "the likelihood of being in deep poverty [falling in the bottom 10% of the income distribution] has increased for women, children, larger families, Black people, and those in full-time work since 2010" (Edmiston, 2021: 8). Specifically, Mckendrick et al (2016: 19) argue that there has been a shift in the burden of social risk onto individuals: "following austerity and cuts, what seems to be emerging is what might be described as a 'postwelfare' social landscape, in a more hollowed out welfare system which displaces responsibility for addressing insecurities to vulnerable individuals, households and communities". In the case of young people: this is acutely observed. One such example is the labour market where there has been a focus on individual responsibility rather than acknowledgement of structural factors and explanations for youth unemployment and precarity (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019; Ralston and Formby, 2020). The

implications of such developments are that young people are potentially experiencing new forms of social harm.

The concept of a youth welfare state is challenging – as it attempts to encompass all areas of state activity aimed and including young people (and this perhaps beyond the scoping of this piece). Yet, the social construction of ‘youth welfare’ remains highly important. It serve to heighten understandings regarding the lived experiences of young people and the vulnerabilities in the context of a neoliberal and capitalist state. More practically, it provides a vehicle to convince policy makers about the importance of provision for vulnerable groups. More empirically this may mean a wider analysis of relevant social indicators and policies to map out what the ‘youth welfare state’ might look like. More broadly, however, ‘youth welfare’ has seen a significant decrease in terms of resources and provision as social expenditure and commitments have fallen as a result of prolonged austerity (particularly since 2010). Webb and Byewaters (2015) in an analysis of children and young people’s governmental expenditure in the UK from 2010-15 note “there is a case to be made that young people have been triply disadvantaged”. They argue this has occurred at institutional levels via reduction in spending; secondly, through diminishing family welfare-based provision (particularly, including in-work benefits), and forms of job insecurity. Thirdly they note, “as members of society, with funding cuts disproportionately affecting services targeted towards supporting them” (Webb and Byewaters, 2018: 405). Lastly, young people do not take up social expenditure in the same way as other groups do and are not dominant recipients of welfare expenditure. For instance, young people aged between 18 and 25 in receipt of both housing benefit and Jobseeker’s Allowance historically amount to a total of 1% in social security expenditure (Adam et al., 2015: 212).

Furthermore, the removal and retrenchment of ‘youth welfare’ has many significant implications for young people – as since 2010, youth services (outside of formal education) have been placed in more precarious positions. Legally, the Education Act 1996 denotes that local authorities have legal duties to support young people where it is ‘reasonable practical’ – meaning “there no minimum level of service specified in law” (Kelly and Munro, 2020). Public expenditure on youth-based provision have also fallen significantly: from £787.2m in 2011/12 to £364.9m by 2017/18 (HoC, 2018). The

implications of these developments are there are emergent social harms at a time when youth welfare has been substantially reduced.

### A 'Social Harms' Approach to Youth?

*A social harm approach would first encompass physical harms. These would include: premature death or serious injury through medical treatment; violence such as car 'accidents'; some activities at work (whether paid or unpaid); exposures to various environmental pollutants; domestic violence; child abuse; racist attacks; assaults; illness and disease; lack of adequate food; lack of shelter; or death, torture and brutality by state officials (Dorling et al, 2008: 15).*

A social harm approach to youth means taking into account the extent that 'harm' is normalised in society for young people both in terms of physical harms and wider societal and individual harms. In the case of the UK, as previously noted: the reduction in the 'youth welfare' has precipitated an increase in multiple forms of 'social harm'. This includes cuts to many domains of welfare that would traditionally support children and young people. An analysis by the YMCA regarding the reduction of youth services (here youth services comprises both more 'open-access' or 'universal') services centred on youth centres; and more targeted provision for vulnerable young people: e.g. teenage pregnancy advice, youth justice teams, and drug and alcohol misuse services). They note, "local authorities have cut their expenditure on youth services in England and Wales by £978m in real terms, which is the equivalent of a 70% reduction in funding between 2010/11 and 2018/19". Furthermore, the analysis emphasises some of the significant impact of these reductions on youth people in terms of increased potential harms – "as the increasing incidences of knife crime, mental health difficulties and social isolation among young people illustrate, these cuts are not without their consequences (YMCA, 2021: 5, 13).

The concept of social harms is often framed through analysing the narrowness of crime (SOURCE) – and how it becomes socially constructed and defined. Yet it has also been used as a way to identify and analyse much wider forms of social inequality. This is because it widens "the notion of financial or economic harm would involve recognising the personal and social effects of poverty, unemployment, and so on" (Dorling et al, 2008: 15). In this regard, it can serve as a conceptual framework to

examine the retrenchment of youth welfare provision through the identification of diverse and emergent 'harms' that have overlooked the lived experiences of young people. Pemberton (2016) sees social harms "as entirely preventable, a product of social relations that could be organised very differently to meet the needs of the many and not just the few" (Pemberton, 2016). In this way it becomes a concept that can be used to frame and understand youth welfare retrenchment and its impact. For Pemberton, the normalisation of social harms are intractable features in all societies yet capitalism produces different levels of harm(s) due to varied welfare regimes and societal social solidarity (Pemberton, 2015). As Pemberton argues: "a clear pattern emerged. The neo liberal regime, the regime that is closest to delivering the ideological model of the 'free market/minimal social state/strong state' form, without exception appears to be the most harmful, whereas the social democratic regime were the least harmful forms" (Pemberton, 2016). Primarily, it could be argued that social harm goes beyond conventional/marginal definitions of destructive, abusive and criminal actions/behaviours purveyed in the dominant legal, political, academic and socio-economic agendas, and includes 'all behaviours for which no legal definition of criminality ...[or injustice] exists, nor any analogous definition of crime ...[or injustice] exists' (Matthews and Kauzlarich 2007: 51). Indeed, this more holistic approach allows and requires a sharper focus on political responsibility (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007).

In the case of the UK, a social harm approach in regards to youth is useful because crucially many of the harms experienced by young people are the unintended and preventable consequences of capitalist society (Pemberton, 2016). Notions of widespread social harm, injury or death may relate to enduring adverse effects to health or career advancement and involve individuals or groups. It can include ideological discrimination against social groupings and allow definitions of crime to tackle needs-based social harms inflicted by the powerful on the less powerful. Social harm theory also includes 'all behaviours for which no legal definition of criminality ...[or injustice] exists, nor any analogous definition of crime ...[or injustice] exists' (Matthews and Kauzlarich 2007: 51). Indeed, this more holistic approach allows and requires a sharper focus on political responsibility (Hillyard and Tombs, 2007).

Crucially regarding social harms and youth – this approach is engaging because it allows an analysis of emergent developments tied to both Covid-19 and generational austerity. One specific shift that has occurred has been the significant change in the

UK youth labour market, as young people are experiencing youth precarity with increased intensity and frequency. The post-global crisis environment of recent years has meant that youth transitions have become increasingly non-linear and fragmented (Furlong, 2016). In UK youth transitions, this has continued to remain the case even as the broader economy recovered from the financial crisis of the late 2000s (ONS, 2017: 16) – insecure labour market positions now affect young people more than any other group (Gregg and Gardner, 2015: 5). Indeed, the persistence of ‘youth precarity’ has become a normative part of education-to-work based transitions – often cutting across individual social backgrounds and circumstances affecting different groups of young people from college leavers (Roberts, 2013) to university leavers (Ingram, 2017; Allen, 2015; Formby, 2017), as traditional routes into work are becoming “extended and disjointed as the structure of the economy shifts” (Hardgrove et al, 2015: 165). Such transformations in youth transitions – particularly relating to labour market experience – are necessary to understand embedded inequalities and injustices in broader social structures (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007: 2). Types of social risk include: the occurrence of insecure and increased labour market positions such as low-level occupational positions (Ralston and Formby, 2020), ‘zero-hour’ contracts (Pennycook et al, 2013), ‘unpaid’ and ‘flexible’ internship arrangements (Leonard et al, 2015) and ‘temping’ (Cartwright, 2020). Using a social harm approach, the nature of these experiences can be fully understood.

### [Social Harms in the UK Youth Labour Market](#)

As youth welfare retrenchment has occurred in the UK – as argued youth has become a site whereby social harms now emerge and significantly exist. Taking Pemberton’s (2015) typology of social harms whereby it refers to a typology whereby self-actualisation and human flourishing are integral to the minimisation of harm(s) – it could be argued that many of the challenges of the UK youth labour market are commensurate with a broader social harms framework. Using such an approach can work to both explain what constitutes a social harm in the modern UK youth labour market, and also provide an outlet to understand new, emerging harms: especially in areas where such questions have not been considered. For instance, this might include emerging social risks in the graduate labour market – an area traditional welfare-to-work policy has left unexamined (Formby, 2014; Formby, 2017) – and where social harms are becoming heightened and emergent due to increased forms of labour market social risk of recent years (Devany et al, 2020). Social Harm(s) in the youth labour market may occur in three particular ways – the deregulated nature of youth unemployment (and education-to-work transitions); the impact of youth precarity (comprising unemployment and broader insecurity) and the loss of autonomy in

relation to broader educational aspirations (especially in terms of the graduate labour market).

Firstly education-to-work transitions in the UK youth labour market is perceived as historically deregulated and liberal, with the role of the government sometimes being limited as a result. Instead, the rationale behind welfare-to-work policy is that “public support is directed at areas of market failure” (Howat, 2011: 7). Furthermore, in keeping with more fractured and neo-liberal regimes, the UK youth labour market sees a stronger focus on individualised rather than structural explanations for youth labour market insecurity more broadly (Ralston and Formby, 2020; Crisp and Powell, 2017). This can be explicitly observed through a governmental focus on “supply-sided approaches of conceptualising unemployment that focus on individual employability” (Ralston and Formby, 2020: 10). Pemberton (2015) uses the example of youth unemployment to frame different types of social harm that young people might experience: specifically regarding NEET youth (not in education, employment or training): “in relation to NEET, while levels of youth unemployment in more fractured societies may be viewed as the result of personal failure or the subcultural rejection of work, more solidaristic societies are perhaps likely to view these rates as a product of structural forces” (Pemberton, 2015: 129). Put simply, where youth unemployment is more normalised, there is increased risk of social harm(s) in societies where it has been historically normalised as part of education-to-work transitions.

The impact of youth unemployment on individuals is also an act of social harm in itself. Explicitly, there is a wealth of evidence that indicates the detrimental impacts of youth unemployment as psychological, social and exclusionary effects of unemployment have been established more broadly (Sage, 2013: 7-9). Psychological evidence indicates that unemployment has negative effects on mental health indicators, with a noticeable improvement in terms of mental health upon acquiring employment (Warr et al., 1988: 64; Winefield et al., 1993; Dollard et al., 2002: 11-2), with the positive effect of employment stronger than the negative effect of unemployment (Gurney, 1980: 212; Donovan et al., 1986). This is particularly the case with youth unemployment. As Bell and Blanchflower note:

... in comparison, with other young people, the young unemployed were significantly more likely to feel ashamed, rejected, lost, anxious, insecure, down and depressed, isolated and unloved. They were also significantly less happy with their health, friendships and family life than those in work or studying, much less confident of the future and more likely to say that they had turned to drugs, that they had nothing to look forward to and that their life had no direction. Many reported having suicidal thoughts.... (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011, p 16).

Furthermore Schaufeli notes that unemployment can affect young people in a “developmental phase” and “is accompanied by psychological and social stresses that make the youngsters more vulnerable” (Schaufeli, 1997: 282). Studying Swedish unemployed youth, Axelsson et al. (2002) found, “tearfulness, dysphoria, sleeping disturbance, restlessness, general fatigue and irritability” was common amongst unemployed young people and that, further, “the unemployed had more mental health problems than young people who were working or studying” (Axelsson et al., 2002:

111). The relationship between social harms and unemployment is further mediated by other factors such as education, the length of unemployment and support (whether that be formal welfare provision or informal help). Yet due to the adverse impact of unemployment on young people, it is a lived experience that carries the potential for multiple for harm.

Secondly, the prevalence of youth precarity has become a significant feature of the UK youth labour market – and although these forms of labour market insecurity can vary, there is still a social cost related to social harm for many young people. ‘Precarity’ is now a modern, cross-sectional feature of modern labour markets, affecting a wide variety of people (Standing, 2011) such as graduates who are ‘underemployed’ through skill mismatch or because they are underpaid (Hadjivassiliou et al., 2015: 36). Other researchers note the extent that young people trapped in in common (and often less reported) issues of ‘low-pay, no-pay cycles’ – where there is a churning between unemployment and insecure poor work (Shildrick et al, 2012). Further, since 2010, young people have seen a reduction in take-home pay of 12.5% since 2009 (Whitakker, 2015) and, more than any other age group, they have experienced decreased wages over this period (Hills et al, 2015: 1).

This backdrop of youth precarity whereby social harms

Thirdly, there

This means that welfare-to-work delivery is often geared towards a “labour market attachment approach” that “emphasizes rapid job placement regardless of the quality of the work” (Daguerre, 2004: 42), otherwise known as ‘work first’. This has meant that modern “welfare-to-work policies are conceptualised as a means of forcing individuals to undertake poor work in flexible labour markets” (Del Fletcher, 2013: 109). In other words, the aim for social policy has become to “facilitate that project of flexibility that defines post-industrial capitalism”, and to get people into employment as quickly and efficiently as possible (Shildrick et al., 2012: 200; Bryne, 1999).

- Social Harms (and diminished social relationships; neoliberal regimes and varieties of capitalism)
- Youth unemployment
- Precarity
- Occupational structural change

### Conclusion – An Injustice of Youth?

Overall, there is a worry that concern that the UK government(s) obfuscate the extent to which young people are vulnerable through re-framing ‘social harms’ into broader injustices of youth.

States now exporting generational social harms through failed neo-liberal orthodoxies that refuse to acknowledge the deep and structural nature of inequality – and almost ‘re-frame’ what those problems truly are.

- Refusal to acknowledge deep nature of social problems and extensive inequality (and re-write what those problems are)

- Positives: A 'social harm' approach would help young people – Is there a framework here?
- Pemberton, a harm-free society?
  - Takes into account wider vulnerabilities of young people
  - Would show the importance of the individual domains of welfare (and what they all do)

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