

The Search for Stability in Stoke: A Harm-Based  
Ultra-Realist Ethnography of Young People's  
Transitions into Adulthood

By Chelsea Braithwaite

PhD

May 2026

## **Abstract**

This thesis is a re-engagement with traditional British youth studies, offering both a novice and yet revitalised insight into what it means to be young today. In utilising a harm-based ultra-realist perspective this research provides a critical and holistic account of the impact current political, economic and social conditions have on young people during this vital life stage transition, accounting for the harms that are produced at macro, meso and micro levels. This qualitative, ethnographically informed study presents a considered and critical exploration of the experiential realities of young people aged 18-29 in Stoke-on-Trent.

The findings of this study are indicative of the harmful world in which young people in the City of Stoke-on-Trent and the UK more broadly now experience the transition into adulthood. This is no longer a period primarily characterised by personal exploration, development and the achievement of the milestones traditionally associated with the transition into adulthood. Instead, it is a time of precarity, instability and anxiety caused by neoliberal systemic structures and the internalisation of neoliberal values and philosophies that amplify the felt effects of such insecurity in a seemingly never ending cycle. In a time where any real social and political change is unlikely, these conditions offer a less than advantageous view of the future for young people as they remain unprotected from the harms of neoliberalism.

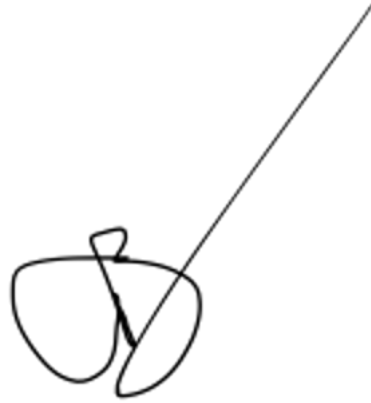
**Key Words:** Youth, Young People, Harm, Ultra-Realism, The Symbolic Order, Experiential Reality, Work, Culture, Mental Health, Stoke-on-Trent, Neoliberalism.

## Acknowledgements

First, I would like to acknowledge my supervisory team whose support has been unwavering and immeasurable over the years. I thank Professor James Treadwell for sharing his seemingly infinite academic wisdom and knowledge. I thank Dr Arta Jalili Idrissi for her academic guidance, her advice and for always being the voice of reason. I thank them both for mentoring me, both personally and professionally, as I made my way through this life altering journey. I would also like to thank Dr Mark Bushell, Dr Sam Spence, Dr Luke Telford, Dr Grace Gallagher and the wider academic community whose knowledge and guidance have helped shape this thesis and my journey. I express my greatest appreciation to my participants, whose stories and experiences made this thesis what it is. I would like to thank my friends, old and new. I am eternally grateful for the support they have demonstrated. Whenever needed, there was always someone on the other end of the phone ready to listen and offer advice when needed. My family, my parents, my brothers, sisters-in-law's and my nieces and nephews. I thank you all for coming on this journey with me, for joining me in experiencing the lows and the highs of the PhD process right there beside me. Without you all, this journey would have been a great deal more difficult. Finally, I want to express my gratitude for my Fiancé, Dom. I thank you for your unwavering patience, support and love. I am grateful for all the late nights you spent supporting me through this project. Finally, I thank you for always being my inspiration to complete this thesis, even when it seemed impossible.

### **Declaration**

This thesis is the result of my own work and has not previously been submitted for any other degree at Staffordshire University or another institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'S' followed by a vertical line and a small loop at the top.

## Table of Contents

<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>II</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>DECLARATION.....</b>	<b>IV</b>
<b>TABLE OF FIGURES .....</b>	<b>VI</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>CHAPTER 2: YOU KNOW WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT THE YOUNG, BUT DO WE REALLY KNOW WHAT IT IS LIKE? .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>CHAPTER 3: ULTRA-REALISM: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING YOUTH .....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>CHAPTER 4: METHODS: AN ETHNOGRAPHICALLY INFORMED QUALITATIVE STUDY .....</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>CHAPTER 5: THE EXPERIENTIAL REALITIES OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN STOKE-ON-TRENT .....</b>	<b>119</b>
<b>CHAPTER 6: STOKE-ON-TRENT: THE IMPACT OF LOCALE ON THE EXPERIENTIAL REALITIES OF YOUNG PEOPLE .....</b>	<b>124</b>
<b>CHAPTER 7: WORKPLACE HARMS: TORMENT, TIMETABLES AND TRANSITIONS .....</b>	<b>152</b>
<b>CHAPTER 8: THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF YOUNG PEOPLE: THE PHYSICAL SCARS OF NEOLIBERALISM .....</b>	<b>180</b>
<b>CHAPTER 9: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.....</b>	<b>206</b>
<b>REFERENCE LIST.....</b>	<b>222</b>

## Table of Figures

FIGURE 3.1. PICTURE OF ST GEORGES NATIONAL FLAG AND THE UNION JACK NATIONAL FLAG RAISED IN MILTON, STOKE-ON-TRENT.....	60
FIGURE 4.1. TIMELINE OF THE COVID-19 MEASURES IN THE UK.....	82
FIGURE 4.2. HUTTER-HENNINK QUALITATIVE RESEARCH CYCLE.....	88
FIGURE 4.2. A CODED MAP OF STOKE-ON-TRENT THAT DEMONSTRATES THE LOCATIONS OF GRAND TOUR OBSERVATIONS.....	110
FIGURE 6.1 AN IMAGE OF MOORCROFT FACTORY IN BURSLEM, STOKE-ON-TRENT.....	146
FIGURE 6.2 AN IMAGE OF THE HIVE IN HANLEY, STOKE-ON-TRENT.....	146

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

*'If youth knew, if age could'* – Sigmund Freud or *'wisdom is wasted on the old, and youth is wasted on the young'* – George Bernard Shaw?

Freud's take on youth and age essentially alludes to the idea that great things could be achieved in this world should the young possess the wisdom and experiences of their elders, and if those same elders had the energy and drive that comes with being young. In doing so, Freud highlights the superlative combination of youthful vigour and mature insight required to achieve progress whilst recognising that these very qualities are often separate and stratified. This take appears to be a far more optimistic reading of the stages of life that we come to understand than the more pessimistic take of George Bernard Shaw who contends that wisdom and youth are wasted on those they are bestowed upon. What Shaw is essentially saying about the young here is that they often do not appreciate, comprehend or even fully recognise the benefit of their youth and the opportunities it provides until it is gone. To further elaborate, George Bernard Shaw, a figure often celebrated in academia, somewhat suggests that the young are thoughtless and unreflective, squandering early years in pursuit of being young, rather than on self-realisation. His quote then highlights the irony of youth being a time of energy and potential that is frequently squandered by those who do not have the wisdom or experience to make the most of it. Perhaps he is right, and in some ways, society today now valorises the conditions of youth in all manner of areas (see Hayward, 2024). Youthful looks, being free from responsibilities, and carefree and unrestricted. This, however, is perhaps a one dimensional and problematic slant. Perhaps more than anything else, youth means being inexperienced, because to be young means to learn and develop. Learning about yourself, those around you, the world. All of it. Perhaps the essence of youth is that there is an inherent naivety and lack of experience to being young that many people

forget. To not know the world, its limits, character, and restrictions and to be open to new experiences is what is youthful. As Freud seems to suggest, a reason that wisdom can be seen to come with age is the wise have had the time and the opportunity to experience and learn. But then that suggests in some ways that learning is not a cumulative process. If this is the case, when can we have learned enough to have transcended youth and entered into the world of adulthood? Can you actually define when you stop being young? Can you point to it? How do we answer this question when there are so many variations in the very idea of youth? Perhaps we are asking the wrong questions. What Freud and Shaw both do is describe the essence of youth from how it is perceived by those who have already surpassed it, when we should really be asking what it means to be young in the moment. What are the characteristics of youth? How do young people experience this period in their life?

In November 2025 I began to wrap up this thesis, writing the introduction and conclusions and making sure everything aligns. It felt that I had travelled a long way and, in many ways, this process was like growing up. These last parts of this thesis undoubtedly mark the culmination of five years of research, but it is also so much more than that. As mentors, my supervisory team have always reminded me that the time it takes to complete a PhD is also about personal growth and dare I say it, the development of some of the wisdom that comes with age (see Braithwaite, Hodgkinson and Treadwell, 2025). Five years is a long time in a person's life and in the time that has passed I have become more resilient, less reactive and more compassionate towards others as I heard the voices and stories of other young people of Stoke-on-Trent. Though some of that felt undone by the final stages of the PhD as the pressure set in, that was not the case at all. This is the process of the PhD and the further you get along, the harder the challenges become and this is where the cycle of learning repeats itself. The occurrences that would have once felt like a challenge that I could not overcome

in the first year of this PhD now do not feel like a challenge at all. The process does not end there however, I may exit this process as a Dr, an ethnographer and an ultra-realist (the latter two will be explained in due course), but also as an early career researcher, which poses new challenges and opportunities to learn and grow.

What this demonstrates is the process of personal growth and knowledge accumulation akin to what Freud and Shaw discuss. What it does not do however, is address the fact that all those experiences revolve around the challenges I, and many others face, not only as part of a PhD process, but also as a young person experiencing the transition into adulthood. Globally, the youth of today face significant challenges. In the capitalist and developed West these are commonly now suggested to include mental health issues (like anxiety and depression), educational challenges (inequality and pressure to succeed), economic instability (unemployment and debt) and the impact of social media and technology (cyberbullying, digital addiction, and body image pressure). Other issues include substance abuse, crime, peer pressure, and growing concerns about climate change. Of course, the types of challenges that youth face are also geographically, historically, socioeconomically, politically, culturally and technologically bounded. Across the globe we cannot reduce the multitude of challenges young people face to a simple and single 'crisis of youth'. Perhaps, multifaceted and often interconnected crises are not the most extreme for young people in Western society. But the existence of conflict in Ukraine or poverty in Bangalore does not mean that there are not serious problems faced by young people in the advanced capitalist West.

It is in these Western experiences in advanced capitalist social democracies that have led to debates about whether youth and the transition into adulthood are more challenging, drawn out, unstable, insecure, anxiety fuelled and an undeniably harmful experience. So, the problem that we now face is, how do we begin to understand youth today? It must be said,

however, that this thesis did not set out initially to answer such a big and broad question about youth. In fact, the initial aim of this work was to solely explore the social, political and economic implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on the experiential realities of young people, aged 18-29 in Stoke-on-Trent.

The global Covid-19 pandemic was caused by Coronavirus 2, an acute respiratory syndrome. The outbreak began Wuhan, the capital of Central China's Hubei province in December 2019 and soon spread to other parts of Asia and the rest of the world by the early part of 2020. On the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2020 the World Health Organisation (WHO) acknowledged that Covid-19 had become a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) and declared that it had become a global pandemic on the 11<sup>th</sup> of March 2020. In context of the UK, the first diagnosed cases of Covid-19 came on the 31<sup>st</sup> January 2020 and after much anticipation, the UK Government declared that the country was to enter lockdown on the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020 and some restrictions remained in place until December 2021 (Brown and Kirk-Wade, 2022; Institute for Government, 2021).

It was in the thick of the Covid-19 pandemic in September 2021 that I began this thesis. Due to the timing and the disruption caused by the pandemic this thesis has seen several iterations (as will be documented further in the methods chapter). However, one aspect that has remained consistent is the inclusion of the Covid-19 pandemic and the government response to frame the experiential realities of young people. In recent memory, perhaps no single event has profoundly impacted quite so much on the population of the globe and as will be demonstrated throughout, it is the lives of young people that often shift and change the most as a result of such large-scale events. Thus, it was without question that the Covid-19 pandemic would play a role in this thesis. However, the scale of this thesis and what it could achieve beyond this revealed itself much later in the process. What has now become evident

as lockdowns and mask wearing seem to have come into the rearview for many, is that, despite first appearing to be the long awaited opportunity for expansive societal change (see Briggs *et al.*, 2020), the pandemic in actuality reaffirmed and strengthened the depth of neoliberal social, political and economic structures. This has undoubtedly increased the challenges and harm faced by young people as they enter into the ever-expanding transition into adulthood. It was for this reason that the scope of this thesis was able to expand. This research still provides an insight into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the experiential realities of young people in Stoke-on-Trent, however in doing so, this thesis has been able to place their experiences in the wider context of what it means to be young today as their lives are governed by neoliberalism.

To achieve a considered and inclusive examination into 21<sup>st</sup> century youth, this thesis has reengaged with traditional youth studies whilst bringing in a renewed analytical lens through the adoption of a harm based ultra-realist framework to account for the way in which neoliberalism has vastly altered the shape and characteristics of youth over the last 45 years and what this means for the experiential realities of young people today. In his work on protection, rackets and private security in the night-time economy in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Simon Winlow suggested he was the inheritor of the Chicago Tradition (see Winlow, 2001). Working in the manner of an ethnographer, using participant and spatial observations in addition to interviews with young people in Stoke on Trent, I similarly take that mantle, and run with the traditions of the Chicago School, of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and of those who have examined and sought to understand 'youth', its nature and characteristics. Whilst drawing on British youth studies provides a more encompassing perspective on young people and their lives, utilising a social harm based ultra-realist perspective provides the framework to examine how the lives of young people are governed

and shaped by the depth of neoliberal structures from the culture it promotes to the systems it informs. Until now, youth studies have largely failed to do this in a coherent and holistic manner (MacDonald *et al.*, 2001). Thus, I seek to provide a pivotal piece of research that brings youth back into focus and asks the question: do we really know what it means to be young today?

The next chapter of this thesis will go into more depth as to why, despite the already expansive body of literature examining youth, the vast changes in the lived experience of young people warrants a revitalised examination of what it means to be young under neoliberalism and just how this thesis achieves this. Chapter two will then build on this by providing a more in-depth exploration of the harm-based ultra-realist theoretical framework that will be used to analyse the experiential realities of young people today. This will be followed by the methods chapter, which documents the key methodological considerations for this thesis. More importantly, it documents the journey that this thesis and I have been on to demonstrate how and why it has become what it is today. The remainder of the thesis will then focus on the experiential realities of young people through the delivery and analysis of the data collected, starting with a short bridging chapter that provides an in-depth introduction to the three data chapters, which focus on life in Stoke-on-Trent as a young person, the harms that manifest in the workplace and the accumulative impact these circumstances have on young people and their wellbeing.

## Chapter 2: You Know What They Say About the Young, But Do We Really Know What It is Like?

*'I prefer being around young people. I don't like situations from the past, definitely no nostalgia. I prefer to think of doing everything new with a different generation that has a different mentality'*- Giorgio Armani.

Despite the already expansive coverage of youth within academic literature, the vast changes in the lived experience of young people warrants a revitalised examination of what it means to be young under neoliberalism. This thesis will therefore set about documenting the events and societal shifts that have altered the shape and trajectory of youth and why this means that previous approaches to understanding the transition into adulthood are no longer equipped to explain the phenomenon today. Thus, leading in to why a fresh insight and examination of youth is needed and how this work will go about doing just that. The first section will therefore provide a historical overview of the way childhood, youth and the transition into adulthood are understood and defined by dominant theoretical approaches and the barriers they face providing an adequate and holistic representation of the lived realities of young people today. The second section will explore the literature on events and societal changes that have come to define and shape youth and the transition into adulthood into a more complex and drawn-out state of affairs (Hayward, 2024). It specifically draws on how they have impacted on the experiences of young people in Stoke-on-Trent where appropriate. In looking at these distinct yet interlinking phenomena, this chapter can start to build an understanding of youth, how it has transformed and what characterises the transition into adulthood today.

This will then be followed by an exploration of traditional British youth and cultural studies. This section will serve two primary purposes, the first being that coverage of British youth

studies will give insight into the important and varying aspects of youth life. Secondly, as British youth studies made advancements in qualitative, ethnographic methods, this section will also begin to build the theoretical and methodological foundations for this study. It documents the history of British youth studies, examining the pitfalls and breakthroughs of this body of literature and will begin to paint a picture of the approach this thesis will take. This leads into an overview of how this study will apply the ultra-realist theoretical framework to deliver a fresh perspective on youth and ultimately deliver an original contribution to knowledge in the fields of ultra-realism and wider youth studies.

### **Defining Youth- A History of the Youth 'Life-Stage':**

To even begin answering the age-old question of what it means to be young and why it warrants further examination, it is important to examine the way in which our understanding of childhood, youth and the transition into adulthood has altered and developed over time. The primary aim here is to provide a historical and critical account of the dominant theoretical lenses used to examine and define the confines of childhood and understand the changing characteristics of youth. As the topic of youth is a vastly oversaturated area of not only research but also public and political interest, this section will draw upon legal and social developments to begin to contextualise the development and understanding of youth over time, starting when the transition into adulthood was not even a social concept.

The terms of youth and childhood can be ill defined and elusive in academia and general discourse. Though rather quite unfathomable now, there was a point in time when childhood was not even considered a separate state of human existence (Ariès, 1965). This is not to say the status and needs of infant dependants went unrecognised, however, prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was much less of a distinction between adults and children. Once a child was able to function without the aid of a parent and could begin to work, they were considered

part of the adult world, no matter their age. Concepts of adolescence, young adulthood, or youth were non-existent and the transition into adulthood was evidently shorter and less complex historically than in comparison to today.

The advancement of modernity sparked the evolution of young adulthood into a more complex and drawn-out transitory period. It was during this time, largely from industrialisation in the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, that people began to recognise that, due to the conditions in which children grew up and their similar treatment to adults, premodern childhood was a time of pain, suffering and abuse (DeMause, 1974). These changing social attitudes towards children were what later sparked developments in child labour and education laws in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. The Factory Acts (1833; 1844; 1847), which relate to the working conditions of young people, placed limitations on working hours and required some schooling for children. The Factories and Workshop Act (1878) consolidated all previous legislation and work-based regulations and most notably prohibited the work or employment for those under the age of ten years old. This came 8 years after the Elementary Act (Forster Act) (1870), which made education compulsory for those aged 5-13. The Education Act (1880) raised the compulsory minimum school leaving age to 10-years-old, which was later raised to 11 by the Elementary Education Act (1893). The turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a change in social and legal attitudes towards child marriage. The Age of Marriage Act (1929) raised the legal age of marriage to 16 years old, replacing previous provisions that allowed girls to marry at the age of 12 and boys at 14 years old.

As the social and legal distinctions between childhood and adulthood were becoming clearer, academia also began demonstrating an increased interest in the area of youth and the transition into adulthood. Academics like Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1763), whose work informed the development of adolescence as a distinct life stage, began to examine the way

children were biologically and psychologically distinct from adults. Though not a developmental psychologist himself, his work heavily informs the approach, which, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, dominated the way childhood, youth and the transition into adulthood were understood (Chudacoff,1989; Tisdall, 2022). Rousseau characterised the period of adolescence as being a turbulent, emotionally driven transition that has a lasting impact on the individual. These observations arguably still stand today as many would agree that the transition into adulthood is characterised by unrest and instability (see. Lloyd, 2018a; 2018b). However, where criticisms of Rousseau's work develop is his assertion that this process is a period of quick transition. Though this may have been true for the time, even by the early 1900s, this was no longer considered to be the case.

On the contrary, American psychologist, G. Stanley Hall (1904), known also as the 'father of adolescents', claimed that the time between childhood and adulthood is not merely a rapid transition, but a period of sustained development that lasts between the ages of 14 and 24. Hall found that the biological and physiological changes that occur during adolescence make for a particularly traumatic experience for young people that is characterised by 'storm and stress' as mood swings, risk taking behaviour and high conflict attitudes become a part of their everyday lives. Hall's (1904) *'Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime and Religion'* brought the study of adolescence and developmental psychology to the forefront of academia (Arnett, 2006a).

Though critical of some of Hall's comments surrounding religious conversion, inherited characteristics and sex, Arnett (2006a, p.187) maintains that Hall's work was vastly ahead of his time, even going as far as to argue that 'some passages read like they might have been published in a 21st century psychology journal article, with information and insights that are strikingly similar to what we believe today about adolescents'. According to Arnett (2006a)

not only was Hall ahead of his time in the sense that he extended the transition into adulthood up to the age of twenty-four, but he also provided an understanding of age-related crime, the impact of the media and the role of depression in young people's transition into adulthood, which, as will be demonstrated throughout the findings of this study, are themes still relevant today.

Developmental psychological approaches link the psychology of youth with physiology and the natural aging process and recognise that there is a physical reality to the often harmful and unpleasant experiences many young people face as they transition into adulthood, which has led to their continued popularity amongst academics and is a key component in this study. This can be seen with an upsurge in research examining the relationship between brain maturation, more specifically the development of the frontal lobe cortex, the psychological and emotional characteristics of youth and the likelihood of risk taking and poor decision making (see (Evans *et al.*, 2007; Bessant, 2008). Nonetheless, what developmental psychology failed to do until more recently was recognise socioeconomic impacts on the experiential realities of young people, with Bessant (2008) questioning the reductionist, purely physiological and psychological approaches taken in earlier variations of the tradition.

This has been a point of contest amongst developmental psychologists for some time, which led Erikson (1950) to propose the stages of psychosocial development. Erikson (1968) understood that social and cultural factors were often overlooked in previous approaches and that physiological explanations of youth could only go so far in helping to define what characterises the unique and distinct phases people undergo throughout their lives. In other words, life stages are not merely a matter of biological growth, they are also informed and shaped by the social and cultural world around them. The life course approach describes how there are eight developmental periods in life whereby a person undertakes a series of

psychosocial tasks targeted at establishing their own self-identity and place in society (Erikson, 1968). For adolescents and young adults these tasks include finding their role in life, forming their individual identities and finding love. Again, all of which are familiar undertakings for young people today. What Erikson (1950; 1968) did not do however, was recognise the impact of everchanging social, economic and cultural structures and the barriers they have come to place on young people in relation to achieving these psychosocial tasks. Thus, keeping developmental psychology from being able to holistically examine the structures that impact on and inform the experiential realities of young people at any given point in time.

Building on previous works of William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, Glen Elder began to develop the life course theory in the 1960s and 70s (Elder 1975). Though continuing to utilise ideas from developmental psychology, Elder adopted an interdisciplinary approach, embracing sociological traditions that understand the varying life stages to be intrinsically linked to evolving external social factors. Through his research examining the impact of historical events such as the 'Great Depression' in the United States of America on the people's lives, Elder (1975) found that to fully understand people's experiential realities, they should be examined and understood within the social, structural and cultural contexts in which they take place. In other words, Elder recognised that time, place and space all impact on how young people experience the transition into adulthood. Thus, paving the way for academia to begin questioning whether there are in fact universal characteristics of youth.

In keeping with the advancements made and concerns raised by Elder, Jeffrey Arnett (2000; 2004) argues that there needs to be a more thorough and contemporary examination of young adults and their experiences in post-industrial societies, so much so that he proposed the concept of 'Emerging Adulthood'. Arnett (2007) contends that the transition between childhood and adulthood was not merely a changeover as proposed by the likes of Rousseau

(1763) and Erikson (1950), but a separate, psychologically distinct life course that takes place between the late teens to mid-late twenties (Arnett 2000; 2004). For Arnett (2007, p.5) emerging adulthood 'is the age of identity explorations, the age of instability, the self-focused age, the age of feeling in-between, and the age of possibilities. Though my thesis recognises that some of these characteristics remain core components of what it means to be a young adult, particularly in relation to identity formation, instability and inward focus, this idea of the 'age of possibilities' is certainly contestable. This is a theme that will be examined in more depth throughout this thesis.

Nonetheless, going back to why emerging adulthood was initially developed by Arnett, it was his recognition that previous developmental approaches did not account for the vast cultural changes that have occurred over the last fifty years. Arnett (2007, p.69) proposes that as a result, 'most young people now spent the period from their late teens to their mid-20s not settling into long-term adult roles but trying out different experiences and gradually making their way toward enduring choices in love and work'. The emergence of subcultural studies of youth from the early 1900s, first in the United States and then from the 1950s in the United Kingdom, captured the increase of individualism and the desire for self-realisation and personal expression. Arnett (1998; 2014) proposes these are to blame for the journey to dependency becoming more prolonged and complex. In recognising the changing nature of youth, Arnett brings into focus the impact current social, cultural, economic and political structures, namely deindustrialisation and the rise of neoliberalism have on the trajectory and characteristics of youth today. The concept of neoliberalism and the impact it has on the lived reality of young adults will be further explained throughout this chapter and the next as it is at the forefront of the analytical lens used within this thesis.

Before doing so, it is important to consider the harmful implications that come with merely examining youth through the lens of everchanging social and political structures. The historical evolution of developmental psychology and its successors demonstrate just how much youth has transformed over time and how academia has had to respond and expand its gaze to account for such changes. More specifically, this meant a move towards more integrated approaches through the inclusion of ideas more traditionally associated with sociological approaches. This broad approach is often underpinned by social constructivism, which began to inform sociological understandings of youth as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Muncie, 2009). This shift towards theoretical paradigms that understand the concept of youth as 'Socially Constructed' came out of valid concerns with the lack of nuance within positivist perspectives (Bessant, 2008; see also Case, 2018) and via transformations in social research more broadly. To account for the changing nature and understandings of youth, social constructivism contends that there is no objective reality of youth and that society creates and applies meaning to the term (Jones, 2009). As such, moving even further away from developmental psychology, a distinctive sociology of youth, was first formulated out of US social science at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was created to explore the way meaning is applied to youth and account for how these meanings change depending on the social contexts in which they are developed (Jones, 2009). However, we might ask if social constructivism moves academia too far away from being able to truly examine the experiential realities of young people as it downplays the very real harms they face and experience because of neoliberalism? Hence, the remainder of this chapter and the next one will begin to document how and why it is important to understand youth through a 'realist' ontology and epistemology whilst continuing to recognise youth for its ever-changing nature.

As such, the next section will further document the events and societal shifts that have vastly altered the experiential realities of young people over time, leading into how this demonstrates a need for a new approach to understanding youth that moves away from both developmental psychology and social constructivism, thus touching on more nuanced lines of enquiry that can be used to unpick the state of youth today.

### **Youth, Culture and the Death of the Life Stage- The Changing Shape of Youth:**

It is undeniable that the experiential realities of those transitioning into adulthood have changed vastly over time and space (Jensen and Arnett, 2012; Wood *et al.*, 2018). To understand how young people experience the transition into adulthood in present day, it is vital to examine and understand the historical events that contextualise and frame the contemporary moment. The history and evolution of criminology more specifically is provided in the next chapter. Whilst undoubtedly historical lines of enquiry are becoming more popular amongst contemporary criminologists, it is only recently that Channing, Churchill and Yeomans (2023, p. 250) contend that *'criminologists have much to contribute to the framing of notable public issues by exposing their historical precursors—by recasting perhaps forgotten, prior events in terms of a notable, recent event'*. Through the examination of past events, this chapter can begin to unpick the impact of a range of historical events from WW2 to the ascent of neoliberalism and the Covid-19 pandemic on the formation of youth as it stands today. This section will not only examine the effects of these events on young people in the UK more broadly but will also, where appropriate, will draw upon the consequences of these occurrences on the experiential realities of young people in Stoke-on-Trent more specifically. In doing so, this chapter can provide an understanding of how the unique

circumstances present within Stoke-on-Trent further frame and shape the experiential realities of young people in the city.

To examine the stark difference between what youth and the transition into adulthood once was, the journey it has gone on and what it has become, a good place to start is the early-mid 1900s in industrialised Britain. If we were to measure and characterise the transition into adulthood purely against the backdrop of working through the main milestones of life such as attaining an education, gaining stable employment, purchasing a house, getting married and embarking on the journey of parenthood (Cepa and Furstenberg, 2021), industrialised Britain was arguably a time and place where these milestones could be achieved much more readily and earlier in life.

Arnett (2006b, p.3) highlights that even as late as the 1960s, a person in their early twenties was often 'married, had at least one child, and was well on the way to a mortgage (and perhaps even a time share in Cocoa Beach)'. Thus, here we also begin to see the rise of a more globalised social system with geographical mobility more pronounced, particularly with the onset of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The socioeconomic circumstances present within the UK during this period, much of which can be attributed to industrialisation (Arnett, 2006a), arguably made it easier for young people to find social and financial stability.

Stearns (2020, p.1) describes the industrial revolution as the 'most important single development in human history over the past three centuries' as it created mass cultural, social, economic and technological change across the globe. In contrast to areas where industrialisation did not prevail and working opportunities were restricted, industrialisation provided a stable, secure and a fixed life course for young people that were tethered to employment, social class, family, and community (Winlow and Hall, 2006 and Hoggart, 1957).

This is true for those living within Stoke-on-Trent as, aside from the local delicacy known as

oatcakes, the city is perhaps most well-known for its industrial heritage. More specifically, Stoke-on-Trent was a leading city in national and global pottery production, playing a vital role in the overall prosperity of the industry at the time (Hammond and Hammond, 1966).

The cities involvement in ceramics precedes the industrial revolution as it has produced commercial grade pottery since at least 1686 (Plot, 1686). However, it was at the peak of industrialism that Stoke-on-Trent became 'the world's leading' hub for ceramic manufacturing (Imrie, 1991, p. 436). During this period, Stoke-on-Trent became an epicentre for mining, steel work and manufacturing endeavours (Edensor, 2001). Imrie (1991) found that by the middle of the 1800s, three out of five people employed within Stoke-on-Trent were engaged in various jobs across the pottery industry. The very existence of the pottery industry not only created job stability, but it also solidified working-class culture and collectivism within the city, which offered a sense of purpose and community.

With that being said however, the experiences of young people during this time should not be romanticised. Historically, Stoke-on-Trent was plagued with harmful working conditions and environmental pollution as result of both the pottery and mining industries, much of which had severe impacts on the health of workers and their families who often lived nearby (See Briggs, 1993; Taylor, 1995 and Bailey, 2000). Wider socioeconomic issues across the UK, particularly during the early twentieth century, also saw to it that life was not always so straightforward for young people during this time either. As mentioned previously, there were a host of events, including two world wars, in Britain that created a sense of instability, insecurity, and an uncertainty for the future. The interwar period was plagued with economic hardship as by the early 1920's the country was in the worst state of recession since the early 18<sup>th</sup> century and by 1929 Britain suffered the fall out of the Great Depression (Lennard, 2020). Unemployment was at the highest the country had seen since records began and economic

growth vastly became volatile and unsteady (Lennard, 2020). This economic volatility continued after the Second World War as by May 1945 the UK was facing a fiscal crisis so severe that economist John Maynard Keynes branded it a financial Dunkirk, comparing the economic state of the UK to bleak war time struggles (Toye, 2004). Lennard (2020) argued that the uncertain nature of the economy had several contributing factors including, the volatility of the exchange rate, reduction in working hours after the first world war, the decline of labour industries and a lack of faith in the economic philosophies and policies. As such, the main economic governance, namely capitalism, and the political leaders who endorsed it were at risk as they had lost legitimacy amid the failure of the economy and the rise of communism and fascism (Streeck, 2016).

To save capitalism after the Second World War, western society saw a myriad of social change, which saw to it that point in time was coined the golden age of capitalism (Streeck, 2016), bringing improvements to the lives of many, including young adults. The post-war period of social democratic capitalism, which lasted between 1945 and 1979, saw economic growth, fiscal steadiness and an increase in equality and living standards (Bresser-Pereira, 2020). To fund the political and economic transformations in Britain, John Maynard Keynes organised a fifty-year loan of \$3.75 billion with the United States of America, which created a decades-long economic tie with the country (Toye, 2004). The three years following the loan from the USA, several large reforms, driven by capitalist socialism, were put into place to rejuvenate the UK (Kynaston, 2008). This included widespread nationalisation, the extension of the welfare estate and the formation of the National Health service (NHS) (Kynaston, 2008). However, there was still some cost to the living standards of citizens in the UK. In a bid to help the rejuvenation process, wartime measures were sustained as necessities such as food were still in shortage and rationing continued (Williams, 2019).

By the end of the 1950s, the personal austerity endured by those in the UK began to dwindle. Rationing had ceased; employment was on the rise and home ownership became more attainable (Regan, 1992). It is a period in which Prime Minister Harold Macmillan stated the people in Britain had 'never had it so good' as he talked about the post war economy and the standard of living in the UK in 1957 (Sandbrook, 2005; Regan, 1992). Young people were able to begin looking to the future with optimism and positivity during post-war capitalist period as their lives began to improve and social insecurity and economic instability began to fade for many. This generation, now known by the not so endearing term 'boomers', are looked at by young people today as the generation that had it all. Perhaps an emerging generational conflict between 'boomers' and those entering adulthood in more recent years is based on the concept of intergenerational fairness, as it is believed that young people now cannot even hope to achieve the same stability and prosperity as previous generations (Shaw, 2018).

It is undeniable that overarching social structures in the UK have changed vastly since the time that post war born generations experienced the transition into adulthood. The descent of industrialisation as the dominant social and economic infrastructure within the UK particularly altered the life trajectories and experiential realities of young people in more recent times. Deindustrialisation was both simultaneously a momentous event and a slow process that continues to have an impact on culture, community and identity (Strangleman, Rhodes and Linkon, 2014). This may be true, especially in areas that previously relied heavily on industry. Stoke-on-Trent is no exception to this and given its industrial past, has experienced many unique issues as a result of losing much of the pottery industry. The late 1970s saw the start of the continuing downfall of the city, coinciding with the decent of the ceramics industry as sales decreased and profits plummeted (Imrie, 1991). In their research on the city, Imrie (1991) points out that this was a significant detriment to the people of Stoke-

on-Trent as extensive redundancies and high levels of unemployment saw job insecurity creep into the once prosperous place for industrial employment, creating a rise in poverty and deprivation that the city has never recovered from. Thus, young people in areas like Stoke-on-Trent no longer benefit from the stability, security and predictability in life that industrialism once afforded (Winlow and Hall, 2006)

The initial loss of industrial jobs, however, was only the start of the problems for young people within the city. Since the downfall of industrial society, Stoke-on-Trent has only local significance and has failed to become culturally and economically important to the rest of the UK (Jayne, 2000). Jayne (2004, p.201) contends that 'its working-class, inward-looking perspective is a significant factor in its lowly and entrenched position in terms of urban culture and quality of life'. Unlike well-developed, post-industrial cities such as neighbouring Birmingham and Manchester, Stoke-on-Trent has been unsuccessful, and arguably unwilling to some extent, in rebuilding a thriving local economy or restructuring the city's landscape (Jayne, 2004). Despite the failure of the pottery industry to continue benefiting the city and its residents in the way it once did, Stoke-on-Trent has struggled to move on. The nostalgia and idolisation of industrialism is strikingly apparent in the social and physical infrastructures of the city. Rejuvenation attempts have been offset by the lingering industrial influence, with many locals reluctant to have the industrial heritage erased from the cities landscape (Jayne, 2000; 2004). Either this, or they are thwarted by the competitive nature of the six towns that comprise the geographical area of Stoke-on-Trent. Many rejuvenation attempts in one town are often mirrored by the others, leading to the oversaturation and often the failure of any attempts to grow the local economy (Jayne, 2004). This has resulted in Stoke-on-Trent falling structurally and fiscally behind other cities (Jayne, 2004). There have undoubtedly been recent attempts to 'level up' the city (City of Stoke-on-Trent, 2024a; 2024b) and attempts the

retain young people through events like the 2025 celebrations of '100 years of the City' (City of Stoke-on-Trent, 2025). However, any real positive impact of these attempts is yet to be seen, thus still leaving little in the way of prospects for young people in Stoke-on-Trent and impact of deindustrialisation still very much apparent.

With deindustrialisation rapidly advancing, there became a need for a new form of economic governance, which made way for the advancement of a new form of capitalism, namely neoliberal capitalism. This presented another opportunity for the experiential realities of young people to be vastly altered. Neoliberalism began its ascent as the dominant political economic ideology in the 1970's, gaining full traction towards the end of the decade after being endorsed by the Thatcher-Regan administrations (Harvey, 2005). This came as, despite previous successes in creating stability, keeping unemployment at a low rate and promoting cross-class prosperity (Harvey, 2005), concerns surrounding Keynesian policies began to arise as the UK saw a lack of economic growth and an increase in inflation (see Smith and Alvarez, 2017). In response, neoliberalism seized the opportunity to become the dominant political ideology, presenting clear and practical economic solutions.

The rise of neoliberalism and the election of the Conservative Party in 1979 came with further loss of industrial structures and ways of life that had previously offered stability to so many young people in Stoke-on-Trent. Though neoliberal logic informs other aspects of life and culture outside of the economy (which will be explored later in this section), neoliberalism is known for its economic policies of privatisation, anti-welfarism, profitability, globalisation and the reduction of public spending via measures of austerity (Jessop, 2004; Etherington, Jones, Telford, 2022). These business forward philosophies also place profit over people, thus making way for insecure working conditions that provide flexibility for employers whilst increasing precarity and reducing the protection for many individuals, including young people

(see Lloyd, 2018a; Standing, 2014). Neoliberalism and its impact on young people will be explored in more depth throughout the remainder of this thesis. What is important to note here however, is how much these economic philosophies are a far cry from those in the golden age of capitalism as they offset many of the socialist policies introduced in the post-war period that gave young people a fighting start at financial and social stability. It is within this same context that the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the government response to it were developed. The pandemic is yet another large-scale event that has not only shaped the experiential realities of young people but also showcased and intensified the social and economic instability they face because of neoliberalism.

The UK government's response to the pandemic prioritised shielding public health; with young people often subsidiary to imperatives to protect the economy. The presence of preexisting inequalities in areas like Stoke-on-Trent resulting from the neoliberal economic imperatives outlined above left those in already deprived areas most vulnerable to the social and economic impact of the pandemic (Briggs *et al.*, 2021; see also see Etherington *et al.*, 2023; Etherington, Jones and Telford, 2022). These changes impacted on vast areas of life, but specifically on young adults in a manner hitherto little documented. The pandemic heightened pre-existing inequalities in relation to personal health, social exclusion and relationships, employment and financial security and overall stability are a problem for youth (see Mellish, Luzmore, and Shahbaz, 2020; Evans, 2021; Standing, 2021).

Blundell, Costa Dias, Joyce and Xu (2020) also found that young people in deprived areas were disproportionately impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic as they were considerably less financially stable than previous generations and were more likely than any other age group to have lost their job or experience a reduction in working hours, creating further socioeconomic insecurity (Standing, 2021).

Guy Standing (2011; 2021) argues that this socioeconomic insecurity and exclusion caused by neoliberalism more broadly, has created a new social class that he calls the precariat. The precariat is distinct from the traditional working-class and is crafted by neoliberal ideology. Standing (2011) contends that the creation of this new and distinct social class is a result of global economic restructuring, diminishing social protections and the ascent of 'rentier' capitalism which sees only the most elite have ownership of scarce assets today such as land and labour services. It is arguable that these conditions have seen a return to pre-modern power dynamics and social hierarchies (Kotkin, 2023). These neoliberally informed structures, policies and processes have also led to a culture of inequality and precarity, mainly through the promotion of a flexible economy that allows for insecure and unstable employment. Standing's (2021) special Covid-19 edition of *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, highlights how the pandemic demonstrated the importance of workers in often insecure roles like nursing, care provision and service workers, whilst simultaneously undervaluing them through creating more precarity and exacerbating the inequality and insecurity they experience. The precariat as a class includes not only young people, but anyone whose life has been impacted and characterised by insecure work. This includes people of all ages from traditional working-class backgrounds who have been displaced by deindustrialisation, those who have migrated to the UK and even those from more affluent and educated backgrounds who struggle to secure a stable future. The precariousness of insecure work has been questioned in recent research, however, as Antonucci (2025) points out that there may be some benefit to this system. This is especially true amongst young people in higher education and those who come from already secure backgrounds who may require the flexibility of a zero-hour contract or similar arrangements. Nonetheless, the harms created by insecure and unstable working arrangements and the precarity it bestows on young people and others alike,

outweigh the benefits they have for a small section of the population, especially those already living in a state of deprivation. This insecurity is only set to get worse as post-Covid-19 advancements in technology are expected to have a plethora of social consequences (see Hart, Bavin and Lynes, 2025), including the continued corrosion of the job market.

However, it is not just the economic ideology associated with neoliberalism that has impacted on the lives of young people. Hayward (2024) contends that present day culture has systematically eroded what it means to be an adult and young people are living in an extended state of adolescence. According to Hayward (2024, p. 1) neoliberal capitalism promotes a 'cult of youth' through divisive identity-politics and individualism, thus, enabling an excess of fear, anger and anxiety and the excessive coddling of young people in a world obsessed with safety (see also Haidt and Lukianoff, 2018) as well as the promotion of the 'kidult' and the avoidance of adulthood.

This a far cry from the experiences of young people in Stoke-on-Trent just four decades ago. Instead of settling down into careers and family life, Hayward (2024) contends that young people today spend their time chronically online, seeking short term gratification and dopamine hits. The characteristics of childhood have also changed as it has been eroded through criminalisation of young people, the undermining of childhood innocents and early over exposure to consumer culture (Barber, 2008; Hayward, 2024). These circumstances have created a bidirectional process of the adultification of childhood and the infantilisation of adulthood (Barber, 2008; Hayward, 2024). As a result, modern-day entry into adulthood is now a time of confusion as it is becoming increasingly more difficult for young people to distinguish and distance themselves from those in the generation below and above them (Hayward, 2024).

It is therefore evident that the cultural shifts that have taken place have created a more complex and drawn-out state of youth that requires innovative and contemporary academic enquiry to fully appreciate. As a result of the death of childhood and the expansion of the transition into adulthood, Hayward (2024) proposes that distinct life stages are becoming a thing of the past. Life course theorists and developmental psychologists define and box off certain stages in people's life course to understand what characterises them, yet could this seem, now more than ever, an insufficient way of examining the question of youth? The remainder of this chapter will therefore begin to explore more appropriate, holistic approaches to understand the lived experiences of young people, starting with traditional youth studies and leading to the ultra-realist theoretical framework that provides the main analytical lens for this thesis.

### **The Rise, Death and Resurrection of Holistic Youth studies: A Brief History of British Youth and Sub-Cultural Studies:**

Prior to the 1940s and 50s, youth studies within criminology and the wider social sciences largely conformed to positivistic, quantitative understandings of youth. Where criminological research was concerned this was a result of attempts to categorise young people as deviants in a way that mimicked wider, positivist trends in criminology across both Europe and the United States of America. Youth crime, deviance and the youth justice system have very much taken a front seat in the interest and examination of youth since. However, there is a body of qualitative research that, despite the focus on crime and deviance, offers up a broader qualitative, empirical insight into the lived realities of young people, often directly from the field itself, namely British youth and cultural studies.

It is often understood that concern with juvenile crime, youth and youth culture, and consequentially, British youth studies began as ideas developed by the Chicago School were imported into the United Kingdom (Bhat, 2016). As such, traditional youth studies are very often regarded as commencing in the late 1960s and 1970s, at which point the philosophies of the Chicago School were fused together with British sociology. This fusion sparked the emergence of the National Deviancy Symposium, which has recently been revitalised as part of a broader project within critical criminology. Initially however, the symposium consisted of several British criminologists, notably Jock Young, Ian Taylor, Stanley Cohen and Paul Walton, all of whom had previously shared a collective dissatisfaction with the direction of traditional criminology within the UK. This ultimately led to the development of a new and radical British criminology, with many members later becoming involved in the development of left-realism (see Kinsey, Lea and Young, 1986; Lea and Young, 1984). Nonetheless, in the first instance the National Deviancy Symposium adopted American ideas from the Chicago School, more specifically ideas associated with symbolic interactionism as well as qualitative, ethnographic research methods that allowed for criminology to really begin to explore and understand the experiential realities of young people from the field.

Except, as much as this is part of the further development of youth studies and the advancement of qualitative research methods within the UK, this is only part of the story. What this narrative does not tell us is that British social sciences existed prior to and independently from the development and transfer of the Chicago School into the UK. Much of which, however, is a forgotten part of history. The remainder of this section will therefore revisit and outline the historical development of British youth studies through introducing its pioneers and tracing its lineage through the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the early 2000s. Not only will this allow for a more all-encompassing account of British youth studies,

but it also presents the opportunity to highlight where this thesis draws methodological and theoretical influence from this body of literature and where it begins to depart from these accounts of youth.

One academic whose work has become particularly difficult to track down, seemingly lost to history, was that of John Baron Mays. While he is cited and mentioned in books, the real value of his work, methodologically, theoretically and his practical applications, are now largely forgotten. Mays' seminal work, *'Growing up in the City: A Study of Juvenile Delinquency in an Urban Neighbourhood'* was initially published in 1954. Mays' work was pivotal for qualitative research as he focused on engaging with the young people of Liverpool to gauge an understanding of their lives from the field. Mays also moved the focus of youth and crime away from psychological trends towards overarching social structures, local infrastructures, cultural norms and leisure. All of which are still vital considerations when examining what it truly like to be a young person today, especially those in cities and towns like Stoke-on-Trent where locale plays a significant role in shaping the experiences of young people. In his later research, Mays (1963), writing in a more general context, also introduced relevant issues related to strain and socioeconomic exclusion. Mays argued that in a society that is largely built around acquisition and retention of property, goods and money, those in disadvantaged classes often felt debarred from enjoying the rewards of industrial productivity. Young people in previously industrialised areas like Stoke-on-Trent no longer prosper from the socioeconomic benefits provided by industrial society whilst also feeling left out from the current system of social and economic governance. As a result of such circumstances, Mays (1963) contends that feelings of resentment arise which may, in certain instances, result in retaliation against wider society. Thus, bringing in the idea that the social structures around us can in fact impact on our behaviour and not just on the wider experiences that we are

exposed to, an assumption that is a seminal part of the approach this thesis takes to understanding lived experience in the neoliberal world. Arguably most importantly, however, Mays (1968) contends that it is not only the types of young people who society have come to expect to engage in deviant behaviour resulting from frustration, highlighting the need to examine the experience of all young people as no one is exempt from the experiential impacts of overarching social structures.

Similarly, the work of Howard Parker should also be considered here. Howard Parker's (1974) seminal work, *'View from the Boys: Sociology of Downtown Adolescents'*, continues the tradition of qualitative, observational, in-depth studies on youth. Criminality is still a focal point of Parkers research, with a particular focus on the pathways of young men into crime. However, Parker broadened the connection between crime and social factors even further. Embedding himself within a group of young, male 'delinquents' from Liverpool. Parker (1974), much like Mays, found that a profound sense of alienation from society and the 'good times' experienced by those in more privileged social and economic situations, contributed to the delinquent behaviour he observed. The participant group, later becoming known as 'the boys', merely wanted a fair cut of the good that life has to offer, 'to be optimistic, to enjoy themselves, to be in control' as Parker (1974, p.154) puts it. The socioeconomic landscape in many deprived areas of Liverpool, however, did not provide the means to fund such lifestyles as the overcrowding of tenant blocks, poverty, insecure work and the failure of local authorities provided less than prosperous and inspiring living conditions. This, Parker concludes, led to a transition from expressive to instrumental forms of delinquency. The criminogenic behaviour demonstrated by participants moved away from merely a form of expression that was often a result of drug and alcohol consumption, risk-taking behaviour and smart, quick-witted attitudes. Law breaking became a necessity as the fiscal rewards allowed

them a fairer share of the 'good times' that they felt excluded from (Parker, 1974, p.154). Parker's work, in some places, feels as though it was written as if it was a contemporary account of youth and life today as it aligns with contemporary ideas around special liberty (see Hall, 2012), which will be examined in the next chapter. Many young people today, especially those living in areas like Stoke-on-Trent where legitimate means of engaging in neoliberal pursuits of consumerism and leisure are sparse, resort in not merely law breaking, but harmful behaviour towards others to offset their exclusion from such activities.

In-keeping with qualitative research, Paul Willis was a prolific ethnographer whose research on young people from the 1970s onwards provided further insight into the realities of young people from the field. What is particularly important about Willis' work is his move away from a focus on crime to wider aspects of youth culture, including everything from counter school culture and the transition into working-class jobs to socialisation, identity formation, music and consumer and popular culture (see Willis 1977; 1978; 1990). Though Willis does not ignore crime in its entirety, it is not the seminal focus of his research, thus paving the way for a broader look into what it means to be young outside of their involvement in illegal and deviant activities. For example, *'Learning to Labour'* (Willis, 1977), for which the participants were a rebellious, rule breaking, working-class group of friends from a school in the West Midlands, had a particular focus on education. In this research, Willis explored the correlation between the reproduction of social hierarchies and social structures such as the education systems, culture and class. In arguing that education does not always help young people overcome inequality, Willis found that though education was branded as the ticket to success, the contrary is true as it reproduces the social hierarchy and inequalities it claims to dismantle. This aligns with ideas and criticisms of meritocracy, which is one of the core philosophies underpinning dominant socioeconomic structures present in many Western societies, which

arguably contributes to the reproduction of harm (Castilla and Benard, 2010; Imbroscio, 2016). It also needs to be mentioned that though this study moves away from Liverpool, which has been the focal city in the research examined so far in this section, and into the Midlands, this is only a small step in the geographical expansion needed in youth studies. This is what this study and ultra-realist qualitative research more broadly, especially ethnography (Hall and Winlow 2012; Treadwell, 2015), is trying to achieve through creating ethnographic research networks throughout the UK.

Further issues of representation can also be seen across the studies that have been explored throughout this section. Much crime-based research examines the pathways of young boys into the world of crime and deviance, however, in their critique of Paul Willis' male-dominated focus, McFarland and Cole (1988) highlight a much broader issue of representation. Though they praise the focus on unemployment and the inequality it causes, the male centric focus contributes to the marginalisation of women, ultimately ignoring their individual experiences in relation to overarching social structures. It is undoubtedly important that the experiences of young women are now fully integrated into wider youth studies as they have seen just as much change as their male counterparts in recent years. As mentioned previously, many young people in areas like Stoke-on-Trent lost much of their social and economic stability and security in the process of deindustrialisation. It is undeniable that male-dominated sectors were disproportionately impacted by job losses resulting from deindustrialisation, however, the socioeconomic shifts that came with this were not without repercussions for women (Clarke *et al.*, 2024). The focus on only men as workers during this time, however, has left women out of the discourse around deindustrialisation and the impact it had more broadly (Ackers, 2023). After deindustrialisation, many women went from being stay at home parents and home makers into the world of employment (see Roantree and Vira,

2018). This could be a result of cultural shifts as plights for equality provided women with more choice to enter the workplace or out of necessity as the precariousness and instability deindustrialisation brought with it left women in already deprived areas little choice but to begin generating an income. This is not to say that previous social arrangements that saw women as home makers was entirely free from its own forms of harm, however, whilst deindustrialisation provided further working opportunities for women, many traditional gender roles such as the majority share of housework and childrearing remained (Pennington, 2024). This also came alongside experiences of employment insecurity, poor working conditions and low wages for women (Bennett, 2013). Thus, the experiences of women entering adulthood are as much in need of examining, if not more so given the previous lack of interest compared to their male counterparts.

Returning to Willis, his legacy in British youth studies continued as a founding member of the coveted Birmingham School, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). The CCCS was initially founded by Richard Hoggart, later led by Stuart Hall, and operated out of the University of Birmingham between 1964 and 2002 (Connell and Hilton, 2015). The CCCS is often credited with establishing critical cultural studies, expanding the study of youth culture, mostly amongst working-class young people in the context of socioeconomic hegemony, politics, the economy, popular culture, the media, race, gender and more (Schulman, 1993). More specifically, the CCCS concentrated on examining the relationship between public opinions and reactions, class, social hierarchies, mechanisms of control and youth sub-cultures and resistance (Bhat, 2016). As Bhat rightfully points out, research that came out of the CCCS (see Hall *et al.*, 1978 Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Mungham and Pearson, 1976) has become some of the most influential work in relation to youth and youth culture to date.

It must be noted that the New Left political approach taken by the school, especially the direction it took under Stuart Hall has been criticised for its naivety. This is particularly true in relation to CCCS' take that youth sub-cultures and deviant behaviours to be an act of rebellion against dominant social structures (see Hall, 1960). This approach ignores the fact that the capitalist market grew significantly as consumerism and commodification became an integral part of individualistic, identity-formation amongst these so called rebellious sub-cultures, (Winlow and Hall, 2022). Nonetheless, the political approach can and must be separated from the positive impact the CCCS has had on academia. The CCCS championed rich, qualitative research that promotes an inter-disciplinary, wide-angled approach to understanding the lives of young people, much of which is still influential in research across youth studies and the wider social sciences.

Youth studies continued to be of interest to social scientists well into the 1990 and early 2000s, much of which took some influence from the political, theoretical or methodological approaches championed by the CCCS. Taking on the tradition of gathering data directly from young people and other stake holders in the field, such as, Beatrix Campbell's (1993) *'Goliath Britain's Dangerous Places'*, which focused on youth culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the lens of 1991 riots in the UK. Adding further dynamic to understanding youth involvement in criminal activities, Campbell examined how overarching politics, generational shifts, social structures, consumerism, employment, welfare, space, and masculinity interact and create environments that promote criminogenic behaviour. This research, for which Campbell collected data through discussions with those involved in the riots in addition to police officers and activists, demonstrates the importance of using current events as a lens to understand the experiential realities of young people. As seen in the previous section of this chapter, research examining important social and cultural occurrences is imperative as events ranging

from the riots mentioned above to deindustrialisation and more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic have shaped the experiential realities of young people today. Not only this, events like these also have a sort of magnifying glass effect as they amplify, make more visible and expose the experiential realities of young people, making them an optimal lens for examining the current state of youth.

Anoop Nayak's (2003) work, *'Last of the 'Real Geordies'? White Masculinities and the Subcultural Response to Deindustrialisation'*, further stresses the importance of examining historical events to gain an understanding of the experiential realities of young people. Using ethnographic methods and a historical lens, Nayak examines the transition of young white men into post-industrial society. However, Nayak adds a further depth of analysis by asserting that social researchers must also take into consideration local variants, identities and cultures in a bid to provide a local-global lens to examining youth. This, as seen in the last section, is imperative as the socioeconomic structures in cities can weigh heavily on the lived realities of young people. This is particularly transferable to research examining cities, like Stoke-on-Trent and Newcastle upon Tyne, that have strong industrial pasts. Nayak's (2003) research also looks at how industrial working-class attitudes, behaviour and cultures have been redirected into consumer pursuits such as sports fandom, particularly football, and leisure activities like drinking and engaging in the nighttime economy. This research further highlights the importance of examining exactly how and where industrial culture has been redirected for young people more broadly after such local-global economic shifts.

In keeping with the notion that locale matters when examining the impact of historical events, namely deindustrialisation and the rise of neoliberalism on youth crime and culture, Robert McAuley (2007) sought to gain an understanding of social exclusion from those experiencing it in a deprived housing estate in the North of England. A key aim of McAuley's (2007) seminal

research, *'Out of Sight: Crime, Youth and Exclusion in Modern Britain'*, was to answer the question as to why certain areas and people are disproportionately affected by crime, deprivation and rising unemployment, especially when overall wealth, employability skills, education and social mobility in the UK appear to have improved. Though the idea that upwards social mobility and education opportunities can truly allow people to break away from the confines of the class and socioeconomic circumstances they were born into should be viewed with a critical lens, McAuley began to further unpick the nuanced and complex relationship between the experience of young people and overarching social structures. He found that social exclusion from work, education and the social sphere was not a result of young people's behaviour, but the ongoing stigmatisation of youth and socioeconomic events and structures that exclude them from gaining social and economic security, which in turn creates a culture of crime amongst young people. Thus, highlighting the very important notion that security plays a vital role in informing the experience and behaviour of young people.

The research conducted by both Campbell (1993) and McAuley (2007) is indicative of further research of the time. As mentioned previously, crime and deviant behaviour, even after the CCCS broadened the scope of youth studies, have dominated the discourse around youth, which is something that this study aims to move away from. It is important to note that there are wider themes associated with youth addressed throughout the body of research looked at thus far. This includes work, education, relationships and social exclusion just to name a few. Nonetheless, these broader themes, at least for the most part, are explored to understand the involvement of young people in crime and though they embody the qualitative methodologies endorsed by the CCCS, they are tempered with traditional criminological approaches.

Nonetheless, there is a body of research in the early 2000s, predominantly produced by sociologists such as Tracy Shildrick and Robert MacDonald (see Shildrick and MacDonald, 2006, 2012; MacDonald, 1997), that moved beyond crime as the focus of their research. Though these works were more in keeping with the left liberalism and soft social constructivist approaches advocated by the CCCS and Stuart Hall, it also brought back into focus the transition of young people into adulthood. Webster *et al.* (2004) for example, documented what became of a set of young people as they transitioned into young adulthood in one of the poorest areas of Britain several years after they had initially been involved in the study. This looks at the impact of the labour market, poverty, social exclusion, relationships, leisure and more on the attainment of milestones. Thus, showcasing that there is more to be understood about the lives of young people and broadening the demographic in which youth studies focus on.

However, traditional youth studies and broader approaches to understanding youth may not be as holistic as they first appear. MacDonald *et al.* (2001) argue that youth studies have ultimately become limited in their ability to adequately analyse and understand what it means to be young as may, though not all, studies adopt either cultural or structural approaches and neglect how the two may operate in tandem. MacDonald *et al.* (2001) confer that the integration of both cultural and structural lenses is necessary to provide a better understanding of the lives of young people, enable youth studies to withstand external scrutiny and to ensure its survival. This is crucial in a time when dominant socioeconomic structures are becoming so engrained on the everyday lives, behaviour and experiences of young people, which this study, unlike many youth studies that come before it, aims to recognise in its understanding of the experiential realities of young people.

Yet, in some ways, this may be too little too late for youth studies more generally as it has arguably failed to stand the test of time as a singular body of research. If there is a halcyon period of British youth studies (though it is bold to suggest that there has ever existed as a cohesive research body) these days now seem to be behind us. There is still, of course, a plethora of research that focuses on youth as there is unarguably a palpable sense of concern with youth and their experiential realities. Yet controversially, it is also possible to suggest that what exists now is quantifiably different and not really a cohesive project or body of scholarship. Concern with youth today is in the hands of psychologists, sociologists, youth workers, economists, historians, criminal justice practitioners, educators, politicians and more. Yet, for all this interest, this fragmentation and interdisciplinarity has not led to the emergence of a holistic shared concern or focus. The reality instead, is lots of interest in very narrow single strand aspects of young people's lives, which is quite a departure in some ways from the early attempts to holistically understand the lives of young people, the social forces impacting them and their transition into the adult world.

To some extent, despite implementing a more holistic approach to understanding the impact of broader social structures, including cultural, social and economic factors, ultra-realism falls into the same trap. Though not a 'youth' project specifically, ultra-realism was somewhat born out of traditional youth studies, with ultra-realist texts such as *'Badfellas: Crime, Tradition and New Masculinities'* (Winlow, 2001; see also Winlow and Hall 2006) and *'Rethinking Social Exclusion'* (Winlow and Hall, 2013) mirror the methodological preferences and lines of enquiry seen within traditional youth studies such as criminality, consumer culture and the precarious nature of youth. Thus, ultra-realism is littered with studies that can be used as a lens to explore the various aspects of youth life. Ultra-realist informed research seems to have covered it all, from violence, drug-taking and the NTE, to relationships,

sport, work, fitness and beauty and wellbeing (see Barnes, 2025; Hodgkinson, 2025; Lloyd, 2018a; Gibbs, 2023; Ellis, 2017). As ultra-realist researchers, like many others, often pursue specific avenues of enquiry that are of most interest to them, they undoubtedly manage to provide in-depth explorations of aspects of life in the neoliberal world. What it is yet to do however, is place the pieces of the puzzle together in a bid to provide a considered view of what it means to be young for many people today, which is where this research aims to bridge the gap.

The next section of this chapter will therefore discuss exactly how this thesis attempts to revitalise and reinvent a more consolidated approach to understanding what it means to be young and the experiential realities of young people through an appreciation of social harm and ultra-realism.

### **Youth: Through The Lens of Social Harm and Ultra-Realism:**

Ultra-realism adopts a wide-angled lens to examine social phenomenon, which can be applied to the examination of youth. The framework, initially developed by Steve Hall and Simon Winlow, is multifaceted and comprehensive as it accounts for the complex relationship between individual subjectivities, culture and overarching social-economic structures. Due to the nature and scale of the framework, this section will introduce the way in which ultra-realism frames and can be used to examine youth and the transition into adulthood specifically before going into a more in-depth exploration of the framework in the next chapter. In exploring the use of the ultra-realist framework to examine the complex experiential realities of young people transitioning into adulthood, and recapitulating the key points made throughout this chapter, this final section will also pinpoint the original

contribution this thesis has to knowledge in the field of youth studies and to the ultra-realist body of research.

As discussed previously, ultra-realism was not developed exclusively to examine the issue of youth, nor has it been applied in such a way across most ultra-realist informed research. However, given the extensive and inquiring nature of the framework in examining the impact of wider social phenomenon on lived realities and its very close ties with scholarship on the wider tenants of youth, it lends itself as a lens and inspiration to understand what it means to be young today. Many ultra-realists examining this wide array of social phenomenon also draw upon zemiological and harm-based approaches in addition to the ultra-realist framework to really shed a light on the harms of neoliberalism (Hart, Bavin and Lynes 2025; Briggs *et al.*, 2021), including those that look more explicitly at youth (Lloyd, 2018a; 2018b). Whilst harm-based approaches offer a theoretical lens that sheds light on the hidden and unintended harms of the depth structures of neoliberalism, ultra-realism provides the 'ontological framing of subjectivity' that recognises how neoliberal capitalism, its economic logic and cultural philosophies have come to govern the lives of young people in that it informs the way they behave, think and feel as neoliberal subjects (Hart, Bavin and Lynes 2025, p.516). As will be explored in more depth in the next chapter, this theoretical framing will therefore allow for a thorough examination of the harms of neoliberalism and the way they have come to characterise what it means to be young today and the impact they have on the experiential realities of young people.

Lloyd (2018a, p.96) frames youth in the context of social harm and ultra-realism more specifically, stating that the 'transition to adulthood is one measured by the causative absence of stability and the subjective solicitation of the external Symbolic Order of competitive individualism and consumer capitalism'. This thesis is very much a continuation

of Lloyd's work on youth and the harms they encounter as a consequence of the neoliberal order and its manifestation in the workplace, aiming to continue this youth project by further exploring the harms of work whilst expanding the gaze towards other aspects of youth life. Though the way in which we characterise and define harm is a point of contention (which will be addressed in the next chapter), this thesis also adopts Lloyd's approach to harm by examining youth through the lens of absence; an absence of stability, of progression, of protection and ontological security resulting from neoliberalism.

Understanding the experiences and later the subjectivity of those entering adulthood in the context of meritocracy and social mobility highlights the inherently harmful nature of these neoliberal systems and structures. Meritocracy, a term devised by Young (1958), is a system whereby a person's progression in society is purely dependant on their individual skills, talent and determination and is closely linked to liberal values of capitalism, egalitarianism and progression (Kim and Choi, 2017). This merit-based structure, which has garnered much support since its implementation, was initially developed to offset any inequality associated with inherited privileges such as family wealth and social factors such as race and gender (Castilla and Benard, 2010; Imbroscio, 2016). Nonetheless, as predicted by Young (1958), the system has ultimately come to reproduce the privilege, selfishness and inequalities it aimed to offset. The very concept of meritocracy operates within the realm of zero-sum thinking as for some to gain, others must lose. The losers of this system, as will be revealed throughout this thesis, are often the young and those living in deprived areas like Stoke-on-Trent whose lives have become defined by ontological instability and precarity as result of overarching neoliberal social, cultural and economic structures (see Standing, 2014) whilst others benefit from the very same systems and structures.

This is where the neoliberal Symbolic Order comes in. The Symbolic Order, which will be examined in more depth later in this thesis, refers to the network of language, social conventions and culture that governs human subjectivity and allows us to make sense of and survive within the world around us (see Winlow and Hall 2013; Johnston, 2008; Žižek, 2001). Put into the context discussed so far, to circumnavigate the structural barriers that prevent them from attaining stability, security and upward social mobility, young people transitioning into adulthood solicit the neoliberal Symbolic Order of competitive individualism, which allows them to put their own self-interests before others to stand a fighting chance against the competition (Hall 2012, Kotzé, 2025). However, this simultaneously exposes young people to further harm as values of competition and consumer capitalism also increase the felt effects of absence and increases insecurity as they fuel the desire to have that which they often cannot achieve and that others may have (Lloyd, 2018a). This is a repetitive cycle that can be seen in various aspects of youth life.

This idea that the transition into adulthood is characterised by the subjective solicitation of the Symbolic Order is something that this thesis will draw and build upon. As discussed, the characteristics of youth and the transition into adulthood have altered significantly over time in contemporary academic scholarship has been quick to understand youth as socially constructed to account for this phenomenon. What this does, however, is downplay the very real and often harmful consequences of neoliberalism on the experiential realities of young people. In identifying that the active solicitation of the Symbolic Order is a generalisable characteristic of youth, this thesis can begin to explain why the realities of youth and the transition into adulthood have altered, without diminishing the realities of young people's experiences. The emerging and evolving neoliberal Symbolic Order both frames the way that society is constituted and allows for understanding of the shift in cultural norms, values and

overarching systems of our society. This may explain how and why youth and the experiential realities of young people have evolved over time and place.

However, what has arguably remained unchanged is young people's relationship with the Symbolic Order as they actively solicit it to make sense and navigate the world around them, whatever that world may look like. It makes sense to suggest that young people, even more so than any other age group, would be in a state in which they actively solicit the dominant Symbolic Order. Young people are active participants in cultural, economic and social structures through their increased involvement in work, education, relationship building and identity formation. This is purely on a basis that young people are at the prime age for such endeavours as they are of working age, too young to retire, most likely to be in education, in the midst of figuring out who they are as people and making their way through the milestones once indicative of the entry into fully fledged adulthood. This also comes as early, informative interactions with the Symbolic Order are vital in identity formation, which is what the transition into adulthood is known for. As such, though the experiential realities of young people are subject to change, their relationship with the Symbolic Order is not, meaning that it is this that ultimately governs many aspects of their lives and informs their overall experiential realities.

Thus, examining and considering the lives of young people today through a new ultra-realist lens is overdue. The use of social harm and ultra-realist perspectives provides a holistic framework to examine and understand the experiential realities of young people, more specifically how they are governed by neoliberalism in a way that past insights on youth have failed to do, which MacDonald *et al.* (2001) argue is much needed to fill the gap within the field of youth studies. Furthermore, this thesis will also utilise the framework to examine the impact of neoliberalism on various aspects of youth culture and life from the bearing of local

infrastructures on the experiential realities of young people in Stoke-on-Trent, their experiences within work and education, to their health and relationship with wellbeing. Therefore, a first of its kind in ultra-realist research to examine the wider tenants of youth in one place.

### **Chapter 3: Ultra-Realism: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding Youth**

Ultra-realism is one of the first new western criminological paradigms to emerge in the 21st century. It offers a unique perspective on contemporary subjectivity in its socioeconomic context (see Hall & Winlow, 2015; Ellis, 2015; Raymen, 2015; Smith & Raymen, 2016; Wakeman, 2017). Ultra-realists argue that criminology must return to its fundamental question: why do some individuals and groups risk harm to others as they pursue their instrumental and expressive interests rather than seek solidarity with one another? To answer this question, ultra-realism seeks to conceptualise subjectivity in ways that move beyond existing assumptions of innate selfishness, repressed goodness, social learning, flexible socio-linguistic construction or as positive hegemony (Hall and Winlow, 2018, p.401).

This chapter will, using the core tenants of ultra-realism outlined in the quote above in addition to approaches drawn from social harm perspectives, begin to outline the theoretical framework that underpins this research. This chapter serves two core purposes. The first is to justify the decision to utilise a harm-based ultra-realist framework to provide a revitalised examination and understanding of youth. This will build on from more traditional youth studies used to frame the experiential realities of young people, which were explored in the previous chapter, to provide a more holistic examination of what it means to be young today. This will be done through examining the need for a new criminological approach that expands the previous scope of criminology, providing an alternative view on human subjectivity and harm. Secondly, this chapter will also provide an overview of the fundamental underpinnings and core theoretical assumptions of social harm perspectives and ultra-realism, showcasing

the theoretical framework that will be used as a lens for examining youth and inform the discussions that take place in the upcoming empirical chapters.

### **Realist Criminology- The Political and Academic Path to Ultra-Realism:**

Ultra-realism claims to be one of the most contemporary, innovative developments seen in 21<sup>st</sup> century criminology (see Hall and Winlow, 2015; Treadwell *et al.*, 2013). The origin of this relatively new framework is, for the most part, a tale of frustration:

For ultra-realists, many of the twentieth century's key theoretical paradigms are flawed not simply at the level of analysis, but at the foundational level. Authors working within these paradigms brush over, simplify and misconstrue the complexity of human subjectivity. Consequently, they are unable to identify the fundamental forces that drive individuals to act in ways that harm others and our shared environments. Most of these paradigms derive from an unacknowledged commitment to the old philosophical tropes of innate goodness and selfishness (Winlow and Hall, 2019, p.26).

Amongst other places, Hall and Winlow (2015) explore the journey of criminology and the need for a new approach in their summative text, *Revitalizing Criminological Theory: Towards a New Ultra-Realism*. Though this thesis cannot explore the critiques of previous theoretical perspectives in the same level of depth, the first section of this chapter will provide a tailored and concise exploration of the failures of past criminological theories, particularly the differing branches of criminological realism. This is in a bid to justify why criminology required a fresh, invigorated look into crime and harm and how ultra-realism proposes to be the criminological framework to do just that.

The fundamental issue ultra-realism has with their theoretical predecessors is the approach they take to understanding human subjectivity, with many narrowly positioning human nature as either inherently good or inherently bad. Hall and Winlow (2019) highlight how this plays out between the opposite sides of the criminological spectrum. On one side conservative criminologists operate under the basic assumption that individuals are dangerous beings who are capable of evil, inferring that strict punishment and order

processes should be deployed to control hedonistic, yet rational subjects (Ellis, 2019; Winlow, 2019). On the contrary, left idealists understand that 'the subject is rational, essentially good and willing to struggle for freedom against the various repressive agencies of the state and the market' (Winlow, 2019, p.26; see also Young, 1975). Implying that those, including young people, who engage in harmful behaviours do so out of resistance against the current socio-political systems in place.

It is in this space that ultra-realism was initially born into. Ultra-realism emerged from research conducted in the 1990s on violence and nocturnal leisure such as the nighttime economy (Winlow, 2001). At the time, cultural criminological traditions were emigrating from America and becoming one of the dominant approaches to understanding culture, behaviours and attitudes. Cultural criminology places resistance against oppressive socioeconomic structures at the centre of understanding anti-social, criminal and any other behaviour or cultures that go against normative values. Though not denying that overarching social structures create a myriad of harmful implications for many, the likes of Simon Winlow and Steve Hall found that trends of resistance were just not present within their research. Ultra-realism also emerged within a very specific set of political circumstances within the UK, which is why it has largely remained a UK based project. At the time of its conception, Britain had seen the election of the New Labour government. It is hard to remember, or even believe now, but this was a time of optimism, a time where the belief was that things could only get better. However, ultra-realism failed to see how things could get better under neoliberalism and how in actuality, this optimism sat firmly within the confines of the current system, only acting to make it a fairer version of its current form rather than a rebellion against it in a hope for a new future for the UK.

The popularity and dominance of realist criminology in Britain can be traced back to right-realism, which began its development in the 1970s and 80s. Right realism crossed the Atlantic during the Regan-Thatcher political era, with British criminologists adopting the approach after the ascent of conservative criminological traditions in America (see Wilson, 1975; Wilson and Kelling; 1982). Right realism was developed not only as a response to growing concerns over rising crime rates and growing number of victims, but also out of a lack of confidence in both preexisting theoretical frameworks and previous governments to solve the problem of crime. It is therefore accurate to suggest that right realism was developed as both an academic and political project that positioned crime to be a real problem that required real solutions. Right realists viewed people as hedonistic, rational actors that are capable of evil (Winlow, 2019; Hall and Winlow, 2015) and managed to influence government policy that reflected such views. The influence of right realism could still be seen into the mid-to-late 1990's, particularly as concerns about underclass and youth crime emerged (Murray, 1996). However, realistically, the realism of the UK was always more politically left.

Left realism was developed somewhat in recognition of the success of right realism, yet also in opposition to it. Left realism wished to emanate both the success of right realism in influencing government policy as well as the emphasis the approach placed on recognising the crime problem the UK was facing:

The central tenet of left realism is to reflect the reality of crime, that is in its origins, its nature and its impact... Most importantly, it is realism which informs our notion of practice: in answering what can be done about the problems of crime and social control (Mathews and Young, 1986, p. 21).

Therefore, much like right realism and other perspectives such as those from feminist schools of thought, left realists continued to move criminology away from constructivist thought and back into reality (Hall and Winlow, 2015). However, left realists such as John Lea and Jock

Young (see Lea and Young, 1984; Mathews and Young, 1986) rejected the domain assumptions made by right realists regarding subjectivity, instead understanding relative deprivation to be a key cause of crime, moving away from purely individual explanations. Resulting from their positionality on subjectivity, left realists rejected the oppressive nature of the policies informed by the right, even acknowledging that much of it was often unfairly applied to the working-class (Hall and Winlow, 2015).

It must be noted that, however, conflicting views on subjectivity are not exclusive to theories that sit on the opposite end of the political spectrum as left-realism was developed in the 1980s in response to the failure of left idealism to truly represent the left and to make any meaningful political impact (Madfis and Cohen, 2016). Left realists argue that left idealists present a romanticised and glamorised picture of the crimes committed by working-class people, viewing them as acts of rebellion against unjust authoritarian measures (Lea and Young, 1984 and Young, 1999; Reiner 2016). This approach portrays working-class people who are involved in crime as innocent victims of the current social, economic, political and legal landscape. In viewing crime and its causes in this way, left idealists largely ignore the real-life consequences of street crime and the harm it can inflict, this includes the very real harm experienced by young adults in traditional working-class areas such as Stoke-on-Trent. However, whilst acknowledging that the dominant social structures are a causative factor of crime, left realism recognises that crime is very real and that most of it happens to be intra-class (Hall and Winlow, 2015).

This is where ultra-realism comes back into play. Ultra-realists recognise that, though left realism understands that crime both disproportionately impacts and is perpetrated by those in the most deprived areas, they fail to provide any deep probing into why this may be the case. In other words, left-realism fails to ask the question of 'why individuals or corporate bodies

are willing to risk the infliction of harm on others to further their own instrumental or expressive interests' (Hall, 2012, p.1). By returning to this causative question, this study can examine the harms caused by overarching structures yet move away from presumptions of resistance. It can begin to ask the question of why young people in deprived areas like Stoke-on-Trent are complicit in the reproduction of the harms that often disproportionately affect them.

Ultra-realism sees the value in the way that left realism has moved criminology away from a focus on social constructionism and allowed the discipline to return its attention to the realities of serious crime. However, this is where any similarities come to an end as ultra-realism acknowledges that the scope and critical magnitude of left realism is limited by its own positionality:

Although some individual left- realists continued to write with critical depth, as a movement, left realism faltered as it mutated into left pragmatism and became intellectually bogged down in its own compromise between critical criminology and administrative criminology (Hall and Winlow, 2015, p.63).

Left realism has failed to recognise that no matter how crime is defined and redefined, there are certain acts that are inherently harmful to individuals, communities and environments (Reiner, 2016). Therefore, failing to adopt a focus that would allow for the examination of the plethora of harms that take place outside of legally defined crimes (Hall and Winlow, 2015). As mentioned previously, left realism also pays little attention to understanding human subjectivity and the aetiology of crime and harm in the context of neoliberal capitalism (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Winlow, 2019). Ellis (2019) highlights that this inattention to harms that fall outside of legal definitions of crime and the criminogenic nature of capitalism is a result of relying on theories that were developed in the previous century, long before neoliberalism became the dominant ideology in the UK and beyond. Resulting in a lack of recognition of the harms faced by many today at the hands of neoliberalism.

Ultimately, the debate between left realists and left idealists 'simply replicated the separation of 'macro' and 'micro' that has misdirected social science over the decades' (Clement and Menell, 2022, p. 1377). Ultra-realists argue that 'human nature, subjectivity, how ideology operates and the relationship between the subject and the wider generative forces of politics, economy and culture' have been vastly oversimplified by past criminological approaches' (Raymen, 2018, p43). Returning to the idea of human subjectivity, ultra-realism adopts the transcendental materialist approach. Transcendental materialism assumes that subjectivity is fundamentally neutral (Johnston, 2008), however, human subjectivity is characterised by flexibility, and as such, people are capable of being both good and evil (Winlow, 2019; Hall and Winlow, 2015). Lloyd (2018a, p.33) proposes that 'If the subject is non-essential, neither 'good' nor 'evil', then the organisation of society at a macro and meso level has a fundamental bearing on the subject'. Ultimately, ultra-realism focusses on the interconnection between human subjectivity and overarching neoliberal structures to return to the aetiology of crime and answer the fundamental question as to why individuals and corporations are willing to harm each-other.

To get to this position on subjectivity, ultra-realism turned to critical realism, particularly the works of Roy Bhasker (see Bhasker 1997; 2009; 2010). Critical realism asserts that observing the world on a surface level and conceptualising events such as 'crime' in isolation can only take us so far. What it cannot do is help us to 'reveal the powers, and forces, and indeed their very real consequences, that exist independently of our knowledge and existing theories' (Hall and Winlow, 2015, p.9). However, to move beyond merely observing and explaining phenomenon, Bhaskar (2010) proposes that we examine the social world through three intersecting domains/ levels. The first domain being the empirical, where we aim to understand social experiences and how people observe and perceive the world. The second

domain is the actual, where we can begin to explain events and processes that occur outside of our experiences, but ultimately shape them. The third and final domain is the real, not to be confused for the Lacanian 'real'. The real domain allows us to investigate mechanisms and structures that shape events, processes and experiences. It is only when we see the world in this way that we can begin to fix the negativities and harms that are present within the current system.

This epistemological model helps us to understand what ultimately informs and shapes our experiential realities (Winlow, 2019). Critical realism takes the approach that human subjectivity and the social world cannot be separated as they inform each other on a fundamental level. Though people have some degree of freedom in the way in which they think and act, this autonomy is in fact limited. As Winlow (2019, p.8) puts it:

'The meanings we ascribe to processes, events and our own biographies are inevitably influenced by the world around us and our experience of it, and our actions are, often unbeknownst to us, shaped by social relations, interdependencies, imperatives, events and experiences'.

By utilising this approach, previous assumptions about human subjectivity can continue to be challenged. Those who engage in harmful behaviour towards others are not rational, highly political beings who merely act out of rebellion against the hegemonic social structures. On the contrary, the way people act, think and interact with others are informed by the social structures around them on a more fundamental level.

Due to the influence of Bhasker's critical realism, ultra-realism has recently been subjected to criticism (see Wood, Anderson and Richards, 2020; Wood, 2019). Wood, Anderson and Richards (2020) question whether ultra-realism provides anything new in their approach to understanding human subjectivity. However, it must be noted that despite ultra-realisms partial utilisation of critical realism as a platform from which to build their own theoretical framework, ultra-realists do take issue with critical realism and some of Bhaskar's later

assertions around subjectivity. More specifically, ultra-realism rejects Bhaskar's take on transcendentalism, as he asserts that people have the ability to escape from the 'real' and transcend the structures and mechanisms that shape their lives to be able to achieve a more virtuous, moral way of life (Winlow, 2019). This is a rather naive view on the chokehold current dominant social structures have on people, as seen in the previous chapter, this is particularly true for young people who are so overly exposed to them.

There are many other elements that come together to make the ultra-realist theoretical framework, which separate it from the realisms examined throughout this section and make it a fresh and holistic way of understanding human subjectivity. Therefore, much of the remainder of this chapter will outline the bricolage of perspectives that make up the ultra-realist theoretical framework, from pseudo-pacification to capitalist realism and everything in-between.

### **The Great Crime Decline: From the Civilizing Process to Pseudo-Pacification:**

Much of this chapter so far has focused on the failures of criminological theory to provide an adequate and accurate understanding of human subjectivity and the aetiology of crime and harm. This in part, can be attributed to an inattentiveness or lack of incentive to delve deeply into the causative factors of harm because of the presumption that crime has declined. Aside from the obvious concern with crime in the 70s and 80s that led to the development of realist criminology in Britain, it is widely recognised that there has been a decrease in interpersonal, serious violence in Europe since the mid sixteenth century (Eisner, 2003). Similar trends in statistical data have also been seen across Western societies, particularly since the mid 1990's (Kotzé, 2016). Under this assumption that people have become less violent, left liberalism placed this perceived progress on human nature, arguing that people had merely become nicer and more considerate towards one another (Hall, 2015; Kotzé, 2019). On the other hand,

conservative criminologists assert that the state was responsible, attributing the crime decline on stricter measures of control (Hall, 2015; Kotzé, 2019).

It is easy to see how these perceptions of the crime decline could have rationally lead to the assumption that the question of crime was no longer a pressing matter for criminologists. However, what these conclusions demonstrate is a rather reductionist, surface level understanding of what constitutes violence and criminality. Left idealists and conservative criminologists alike make the same mistake in that they narrowly focus on legally defined crimes, ignoring all other violence and harm that occur outside of these legal frameworks (Kotzé, 2019). This has ultimately led to criminology providing little explanation for harmful subjectivities and offering even less in the way of practical responses to the non-illegal harms that people are often subjected to daily (Hall and Winlow, 2015). Ultra-realism therefore challenges reductive assumptions surrounding civility and the concept of the crime decline and assert that we must broaden our comprehension of violence and reframe our understanding of the perceived reduction in crime.

Though not denying that there has been a decline in violent crime, the ultra-realist theoretical framework recognises that there are a plethora of harms that expand beyond physical, interpersonal violence that, despite being on the rise, have largely gone unrecognised in the accounts outlined above (Hall and Winlow, 2015). Ultra-realism turns to Elias' (1994 [1939]) research, which rejects the liberal assumption that humanity has merely become more 'civilised', to begin to understand the transformation of society away from violent crime to more abstract forms of violence and harm. According to Elias (1994 [1939]), this was the result of what he termed the 'civilising process', during which the emotional composition of human beings significantly altered as a revulsion towards physical violence was developed. Elias asserts that there are three fundamental explanations for why humans stopped being able to

tolerate such acts of violence. This includes the state monopolisation of violence, which ultimately gave way to the implementation of control measures, the upkeep of social independence, for which civilized cooperation and collective responsibility was branded as a necessity, and finally, the dispersal of manners, which promoted civilized behaviour and less tolerance for violence. These three interconnected pillars create civilized social conditions that, for the most part, protect people from physical violence inflicted by others (Elias, 2007 [1983]).

Elias' civilising process provides an in-depth account of why it may be that society has seen a reduction in violent crime, however, it is not without its flaws. Critics of Elias assert that the civilizing process pays little attention to the political economy and the impact it can have on creating harmful and violent subjectivities (Ellis, 2019), which is what ultra-realism sets out to do. Hall and Winlow (2017, p. 108) emphasise that *'Capitalist market economies cannot become efficient and expand under conditions of arbitrary physical violence [...] neither can they do so under conditions of institutionalised altruism'*. In other words, forms of abstract violence that fall outside of serious interpersonal violence are a necessary part of upholding current socio-political infrastructures (Hall and Winlow, 2015). Additionally, though Elias' theorisations surrounding the civilizing process may have been adequate in explaining the decline of serious violent crime at the time of its conception, the civilizing process itself did not *'pacify the population along a progressive linear trajectory that remains intact today as some scholars have claimed'* (Bushell and Braithwaite, 2024, p. 446; see also Pinker, 2012). As such, Hall and Winlow (2017, p.107) assert that *'there has never been a 'civilizing process'. Rather, a long-running economically functional process, beginning in the late 14th century, has moved civil society away from physical brutality and towards socio-symbolic aggression'*. It is in the criticisms of Elias' approach that ultra-realism truly begins to build its own

theoretical foundations surrounding the changing nature of violence and understanding violent subjectivities today.

Ultra-realism utilises Steve Hall's concept of pseudo-pacification to explain attempts to progressively pacify the population and examine how *'physical violence was sublimated and harnessed to drive the nascent market economy, which established and reproduced an economically productive condition of pseudo-pacified 'orderly disorder'* (Horsley, Hall, and Kotzé, 2015, p. 18; see also Hall, 2000; Hall and Winlow, 2003; Hall 2012). Hall's notion of pseudo-pacification asserts that physical violence has not been eliminated but redirected to perform two vital functions for the growing market economy (Winlow and Hall, 2017; Hall 2014; Winlow, 2014; Hall, 2000):

- 1: The protection of property rights and the reduction of violent interactions between traders to enhance safer trading activity– this has provided the crucial conditions needed for expanding the production and circulation of commodities.
2. The sublimation of destructive and repressive physical aggression into functionally aggressive yet physically pacified rule-bound competition for wealth and status - represented by the acquisition and display of socio-symbolic objects in a burgeoning consumer culture – this expanded the demand for commodities.

To explain this transition, ultra-realists assert that the lack at the centre of subjectivity creates a need within people to try and fill the void in ways that are accessible to them and as such they focus on their own personal wants and desires (Winlow and Hall, 2017). According to Johnston (2008), people are hard-wired for plasticity and as such their needs, desires and drives can change and be redirected. The pseudo-pacification process has merely redirected people's libidinal energy away from traditional forms of interpersonal violence and into socio-

symbolic competition (Hall, 2014). As a result, the pseudo-pacified subject is intrinsically and extrinsically motivated by the determination to gain symbolic status and material success (Hall, 2020).

The use of pseudo-pacification will therefore allow this thesis to begin to unpick the harms and the broader threats of violence young people in areas like Stoke-on-Trent face because of current socioeconomic systems. Not as failures of the current system, but as necessary part of its everyday function (see Briggs *et al.*, 2021). Adopting the standpoint that violence has been redirected also provides for a wider interpretation of harm that moves beyond the previously narrow focus on interpersonal violence.

#### **Understanding Harm and Violence- A Harm-Based Ultra-Realist Perspective:**

To fully understand the causes of crime and harm, this thesis has adopted the use of a harm-based ultra-realist perspective, which has been utilised and developed across ultra-realist research (see Kotzé, 2018; Lloyd, 2018a; Raymen, 2019a; Briggs *et al.*, 2021). It is imperative that this study draws upon both social harm perspectives and the ultra-realist criminological framework when examining the causal factors of harm to ensure that both the systemic violence produced by neoliberally informed socioeconomic structures and harm perpetrated by individuals and corporations with a willingness to cause harm to others are accounted for (Lloyd, 2018a). In doing so, this thesis will be able to account for both negative and positive motivations to harm, how they impact on the experiential realities of those living in Stoke-on-Trent and ultimately demonstrate the importance of utilising both social harm and ultra-realist perspectives to provide a wide-lens approach to understanding harm and violence. To bridge the two perspectives together, the work of Slavoj Žižek will be drawn upon.

## Social Harm, Neoliberalism and Negative Motivations to Harm:

This next section will examine the social harm perspective, its development and its contribution to providing a wide interpretation of harm by expanding its lens to include the impact of wider social structures. Social harm, or Zemiology as is it also often known, is an emerging perspective that has continued to gain traction across criminology and other areas of academia (Canning and Tombs, 2021; Hillyard and Tombs, 2017; Pemberton, 2015). Social harm based approaches were initially developed in response to the inattentiveness of criminology and criminal justice to harms that fall outside of legally defined crimes, despite rising levels of non-traditional forms of violence (Raymen, 2019a; Tombs and Whyte, 2011). As a result, social harm perspectives challenge criminology to expand its gaze and begin to include a myriad of harms that occur as a result of entirely legal events, processes, structures and actions in its examination of violence and harm (Pemberton, 2015; Hillyard and Tombs, 2004). This includes, but not limited to, work-based harms such as zero-hour contracts (see Lloyd, 2018a; 2018b), health and safety infringements (Tombs and Whyte, 2015), housing and health inequalities (Gurney, 2023) and the harms caused by the response to the Covid-19 pandemic (Gurney, 2023; Briggs *et al.*, 2021).

One of the most significant points of contention within harm-based research is the way in which we define and categorise harm, with many iterations appearing across this expanding body of literature. For example, Hillyard and Tombs (2004) argue that harm can be placed into four main categories, including physical, financial, emotional/ psychological and cultural harms, whereas Pemberton (2015) suggests a broader approach in which harm is associated with acts and omissions that compromise human flourishing. What this boils down to is a lack of consensus as to what actually constitutes harm. Raymen (2023) captures this issue well by highlighting that the current political and cultural climate has created a conceptual

predicament. As liberalism promotes individual liberty, Raymen (2019b) contends that people have lost a collective understanding of the human or social good. This lack of common grounds and the focus of academic research on defining social harm rather than determining the social good has therefore created a conceptual enigma (Raymen, 2023; 2019b). This inability to come to a general consensus evokes criticism of social harm research for being too vague and unclear as the confines of the discipline are undefined. To avoid these potential criticisms, this thesis adopts Lloyd's approach to understanding harm (as discussed in the last chapter) (see Lloyd 2018a; 2018b). Lloyd (2018a, p.59) confers that the harm experienced by young adults often occurs in the form of 'absence of stability, protection, and ethical responsibility', resulting from the depth of neoliberal systemic structures present today. It is recognised that ultra-realism may be taking a new direction in defining harm, aligning more with biological underpinnings (see Hall and Winlow, 2025), however this study uses its earlier conceptualisation of harm (Lloyd, 2018a; 2018b) as it is the most appropriate and applicable to both understanding the voiced and unspoken experiences of participants.

Continuing on, Pemberton (2015) also places social harm within the context of neoliberalism specifically, bringing to attention the significant increase in inequality since its inception. Pemberton therefore asserts that neoliberalism should be considered as the most harmful form of capitalism. Thus, placing Western, neoliberal societies at the forefront of this social harm perspective. It is the impact of neoliberal logic on overarching economic structures that often give way to harm. According to Klein (2014, p.72) there are three main components of neoliberal economics: 'privatization of the public sphere, deregulation of the corporate sector and the lowering of income and corporate taxes, paid for with cuts in public spending'. Under these economic conditions, the UK has seen significant structural transformations over the last 45 years, including deindustrialisation, globalisation, deregulation, privatization of the

public sphere and reduced government intervention (see Jessop, 2004) (the impact of which can be seen in chapter 6). These economic agendas and policies also brought with them a rise in unemployment, increased work-based inequalities, poverty and homelessness amongst a plethora of other harms. These harms are what Hall and Winlow (2015) refer to as negative motivations to harm, as they are an unintended consequence of the normal function of capitalism (Telford and Lloyd, 2020).

As seen throughout, many once industrialised areas are often most affected by negative motivations to harm as they have been economically and politically abandoned since the ascent of neoliberal capitalism. This means that many once industrialised cities have been left in a state of unending recession and social and economic deprivation (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2013). Stoke-on-Trent is no exception to this. This is therefore a good place to deliver further insight into the state of Stoke-on-Trent under neoliberalism today. This will provide a, albeit brief, insight into the circumstances in which young people in Stoke-on-Trent go through the process of transitioning into adulthood, demonstrating just how tough and potentially harmful environment it can be to grow up in.

As of March 2024, Stoke-on-Trent has the highest number of children, in proportion to the local population, being cared for under social services compared to any other constituency in England (Local Government Association, 2025). The city is also plagued with health inequalities as it has the highest rates of infant death across England, increased numbers of premature deaths under the age of 75, high rates of obesity and low levels of physical activity and above average drug, alcohol and tobacco usage (Director of Public Health, 2023). Physical health aside, mental health is also a crisis within the city as the occurrence of common mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety is 17.8% to 20.3%, which is 4.3% higher than the national average (Director of Public Health, 2024). This comes as mental health and

related services in the area need improvement (Director of Public Health, 2024), undoubtedly a result of preexisting neoliberal economic imperatives and increased demand and financial pressure since the Covid-19 pandemic (see BMA, 2025).

As time has progressed and further systemic harms have infiltrated the city and impacted upon its residents, Stoke-on-Trent has now essentially become a buzzword for deprivation as the city continues to encompass high levels of poverty and hardship (The Hardship Commission, 2015). The Hardship Commission (2015) also found that there is a lack of understanding of the high levels of deprivation, culture of hardship and complexity of the issues within the city and a clear strategy aimed at overcoming these levels of deprivation does not exist. As a result, the city has continued to operate in a state of depravity, coming in as the 13th most deprived area out of 317 constituencies in England in 2019 and just under one fifth of Stoke-on-Trent residents were considered economically deprived as a result of low income (Director of Public Health, 2023). As discussed previously, much of this deprivation is a result of industrialised areas losing their 'raison d'être' during the shift from industry to a service-based economy, which has not provided cities like Stoke-on-Trent with an adequate replacement for their previously prosperous industry (Telford, 2022).

However, the issue of displacement runs far deeper than this and can be also traced back to the city's geographical location and the self-perception of their regional identity. Geographically, Stoke-on-Trent is in the West Midlands, however, if asked, many residents would undoubtedly argue without reservation that they are Northern. It is not just locals that perceive Stoke-on-Trent to be a part of the North as in the 1980s, the West Midlands was practically reclassified as such as its culture and economic status more closely aligned with cities in the North (Martin, 1988). Though a point that that may cause controversy, this recategorisation and the adoption of a Northern identity arguably contributes to the erasure

of the Midlands. The inattentiveness to cities within the Midlands, as noted earlier in this thesis, also transfers into academia. Though there has been some increased academic interest in Stoke-on-Trent in recent years (see Hodgkinson, 2025; Etherington *et al.*, 2023; Gibbs, 2021; Mahoney and Kearon, 2018) much ultra-realist research focuses on the displacement of once industrialised cities predominantly in the North of the country (for example Bushell, 2023; Telford, 2022). Thus, resulting in a lack of both political and academic representation for the people of Stoke-on-Trent and an oversight of their individual socioeconomic needs.

As Stoke-on-Trent has largely been forgotten about and any rescue attempts are either spoiled by the competitiveness of the six towns (Jayne, 2004) or focus more on bringing new people into the city rather than improving the lives of those who live there, many locals have demonstrated a dissatisfaction with their circumstances and the political-economic abandonment they have faced (MacLeod and Jones, 2018). Despite this discontent, the blame has not necessarily been pointed upward at the overarching structures that create the socioeconomic harms outlined above. On the contrary, these frustrations are often directed elsewhere, most notably towards immigration. So much so that the city was branded the Brexit Capital of Britain, with 69.4% of voters in Stoke-on-Trent voting in favour of leaving the European Union (EU) (Mahoney and Kearon, 2018). Though the EU referendum was not solely an anti-immigration project, the *Vote Leave* campaign turned into such with messages like 'Vote Leave: Take Back Control' (MacLeod and Jones, 2018). Subsequently, this has led to the increase of reported violence, racial tension and even protests and riots in Hanley in 2024 (see Mahoney and Kearon, 2018). These protests have continued throughout the city, most recently through the raising of the St Georges National flag of England (see figure 3.1).



Figure 3.1. Picture of St Georges National Flag and The Union Jack National Flag Raised in Milton, Stoke-On-Trent.

Violence does not stop there, however, as the inequality and hardship that have come to characterise Stoke-on-Trent have made the city a hotspot for crime. Stoke-on-Trent has seen an increase in serious violent crime, including gang violence and the use of weapons (Violence Reduction Alliance, 2024). Young males aged 18-25 and those experiencing inequality like living in poverty, poor educational attainment and those with a history of crime in the family are amongst those most likely to be involved (Violence Reduction Alliance, 2024). Though traditional forms of violence are not a key focus of this thesis, it demonstrates the vast and wide ranging impact systemic harms have had on the city of Stoke-on-Trent and provides context to the everyday lives of those who live there. How the city is experienced and perceived can ultimately be seen in the headlines of local news outlets, examples include *'Controversial poll ranks Stoke-on-Trent among 'worst places to live in UK'* (Castle, 2023) or *'Stoke-on-Trent one of the most dangerous places to live - check our crime map'* (Ault and Parker, 2025).

This section demonstrates the bleak realities for many young people who grow up in the city of Stoke-on-Trent and the harms they encounter daily as a result of overarching socioeconomic structures and local nuances. To understand the depth and breadth of harms experienced by these young people, there is an obvious need for this thesis to take a wide approach to understanding harm and violence, thus lending itself to a social harm approach. Social harm based approaches therefore provide the theoretical foundations, tools and language needed to examine the none-traditional forms of harm that arise out of the everyday operations of neoliberalism (Telford and Lloyd, 2020; Boulki and Kotzé, 2018; Hillyard and Tombs, 2017). However, social harm perspectives only account for half the story when it comes to understanding the underlying causes of harm today as they fail to account for individual level harms. This does not just include interpersonal violence, but the willingness of individuals to inflict harm on others that is not only legal, but often normalised (Briggs *et al.*, 2021; Kotzé, 2025). Therefore, the next section of this chapter will move on to discuss positive motivations to harm.

#### Ultra- Realism, The Neoliberal Subject and Positive Motivations to Harm:

The ultra-realist theoretical framework was developed to overcome the inattention previous theoretical perspectives, like social harm, have paid to the production of harm at an individual level. This approach moves away from negative motivations to harm that account only for the harm caused by macro-level systems and structures, to a focus on positive motivations to harm that are inflicted by and towards individuals at a micro-level (Hall and Winlow, 2015). Winlow (2019, p. 1) confers that '[a]t the core of ultra-realism lies an original account of contemporary subjectivity as it acts in its socioeconomic context' (see also Hall and Winlow, 2015; Winlow and Hall, 2013; Raymen, 2015). In other words, ultra-realism attempts to bring criminological investigation back to human subjectivity to explain individual level harms whilst

keeping the current political economy at the core of its understanding. This approach allows ultra-realists to expand the parameters of their research to include a myriad of individual harms, much of which are within the scope of this research and can be used as a lens to understand the experience of young people today in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond.

To understand the willingness to cause harm (also known as positive motivations to harm or special liberty) ultra-realists turn to the notion of special liberty, a concept developed by Hall (2012). According to ultra-realists, some, but not all, pseudo-pacified subjects exercise what they call special liberty, which is described as an *'anti-ethos that consists of a sense of entitlement felt by an individual who will risk harm to others in order to further their own instrumental or expressive interests'* (Hall and Winlow, 2015, p.91). In other words, it is the notion that some people exercise a self-awarded right to do what it takes to obtain wealth and status and to freely express their own desires, despite the potential harmful consequences of their actions on others (Raymen, 2018).

There are two distinct motivations behind special liberty, including expressive and instrumental forms. There has been mention of both since the conception of special liberty, however, until recently, ultra-realism has failed to make clear distinctions between the two variations. Kotzé (2025) asserts that we must differentiate between expressive and instrumental motivations to harm as they serve to represent two very different types of

personal interest. As such, the remainder of this section will explore the way in which Kotzé (2025) proposes that the two separate forms of special liberty should be understood.

Expressive motivations to harm have seen much exposure within ultra-realist informed research (See Montmagny Grenier, 2021; Yardley; 2021; Miles, 2024), thus shaping much of our current understanding of special liberty. This type of special liberty arises when a person will do anything to advance themselves, or as Briggs *et al.* (2021, p.18) put it: *'In a culture of competitive individualism, standing out from the crowd, gaining edge over others, displaying status and avoiding symbolic or cultural annihilation, some will do whatever it takes, including harming others'*. This willingness to cause harm to advance oneself can be attributed to *'hyper-idealized expression or embodiment of neoliberal-postmodernist tenets —greed, ruthless ambition, immediate gratification, competitive individualism, liberal conceptions of freedom and a concern with status, display and the cultivation of envy in others'* (Kotzé 2025, p.319). Thus, placing neoliberal values and philosophies at the centre of understanding expressive forms of special liberty. This approach has allowed ultra-realist informed research to examine a range of harmful individual actions ranging from the breaking of lockdown rules to the harmful behaviour conducted by ambitious and competitive coworkers (see Briggs *et al.*, 2021; Lloyd, 2018a). This approach accounts for how individual actions interlink with overarching social structures and values and provides a lens for this study to begin to understand how this impacts on the experiential realities of young people.

Nonetheless, there is a much-forgotten motivation to harm that has potential to provide an even clearer, more nuanced insight into the harms young people face daily. Though in many instances, both expressive and instrumental self-interest are at play (Kotzé, 2025), there has been a significant oversight of instrumental forms of self-interest within ultra-realist research. This is not to say that previous research does not allude to there being motivations to harm that fall outside of expressive self-interest, for example, Lloyd (2018a) recognises that some harmful actions conducted by individuals in the workplace are acts of self-preservation. What previous research has failed to do however, is explore these variances in motivation more explicitly, leaving instrumental special liberty to fall below the wayside. To correct this, Kotzé (2025) provides a framework that separates the two variations of special liberty and delivers a more in-depth exploration as to what instrumental self-interest entails. Kotzé (2025, p.319) describes instrumental self-interest as being the:

pragmatic circumvention of rules, laws and conventional practices and customs. In the service of this form of self-interest, special liberty is employed to *protect* the self at the expense of others.

Instrumental forms of special liberty are therefore placed within the context of the neoliberal capitalist economy, which prioritises profit over people and is plagued with socioeconomic uncertainty and instability, leading to many individuals awarding themselves the sovereignty to risk harm to others to ensure their own material and/ or economic survival (Kotzé, 2025). The impact of changing structures and events on the socioeconomic instability of young people not only in Stoke-on-Trent, but also across the UK, have been discussed at varying points throughout this thesis. However, it is important to reconsider this here to demonstrate how, in addition to the institutional adoption of neoliberal values and economic agendas, they contribute to the reproduction of harm at an individual level. As mentioned previously, for many young people in areas like Stoke-on-Trent, industrialism provided a stable, secure and

fixed future (Winlow and Hall, 2006; Hoggart, 1957). The advancement of neoliberalism and the downfall of industrial ways of life came as a significant detriment to the people of Stoke-on-Trent as extensive redundancies and high levels of unemployment saw a rise in poverty and deprivation across the city (Imrie, 1991). As a result, Stoke-on-Trent continues to be a place of hardship and deprivation, making it a particularly difficult place to experience the transition into adulthood. The advancement of neoliberalism has also seen financial and economic hardship on a national level as the UK has seen at least five financial recessions since the 1970s. The global financial crash of 2008 particularly affected the socioeconomic stability of young people entering adulthood, with Dettling (2016) finding that those entering adulthood during this time experienced some of the highest levels of hardship out of any other age group. The study also found that the recession has caused a decline in earning and employment, instigated an increase in the number of young adults residing with parents as home ownership has become less attainable, and made it more difficult for young people entering adulthood to accumulate wealth and secure their financial future (Dettling, 2016). In addition, the pandemic also saw a rise in unemployment and deprivation across the country, with those already facing instability and hardship prior to the pandemic amongst those most affected by these unintended consequences (Briggs *et al.*, 2021).

Outlined above are several events and circumstances, including local socioeconomic structures, deindustrialisation, the ascent of neoliberal employment agendas, multiple recessions, and the Covid-19 pandemic that have caused a range of harmful outcomes for young people. Above all these circumstances have created a lack of opportunity and increased instability and uncertainty of a financially and socially stable future for young people, putting into jeopardy their material success and ultimately their transition into adulthood. These structures and events therefore create the perfect environment for instrumental motivations

to come into fruition as people will do anything they can, include inflicting harm onto others, to either protect what economic security they have or to advance their socioeconomic circumstances, even just a little, in a world where opportunities to do so come along rarely. This comes as neoliberal economic agendas place the needs of companies and the wider economy over the needs of individual's, thus promoting precarious working conditions like job sharing, casual contracts and fixed-term employment (see Applebaum 2012) over individual economic safety and stability (Lloyd, 2018a). Ultimately, these events and processes place young people in Stoke-on-Trent at risk of being subjected to further harm from those around them as they would do anything to protect themselves from falling even further victim to these harmful socioeconomic structures. This approach also provides an explanation as to why some young people in similar positions may participate in the reproduction of harm as they too fight for their own economic survival, thus further answering the question as to why most harm and violence occur intra-class (Hall and Winlow, 2015).

So far, this section has demonstrated that life for young people in Stoke-on-Trent can be challenging due to a combination of socioeconomic factors, impacting their health, education, and overall wellbeing. High levels of poverty, insecurity, poor educational attainment, and health inequalities contribute to a less favourable life experience for many young people. Stoke-on-Trent can accurately be described as a case study in slow violence, highlighting how violence is more nuanced and complex than often first thought. Therefore, the next part of this section will discuss the work of Slavoj Žižek, who provides a framework for understanding and connecting the various types of violence.

Connecting Social Harm and Ultra-Realism - Žižek's Triumvirate of Violence:

To bridge the gap between social harm and ultra-realism, it is important to turn to the work of Slavoj Žižek. Žižek (2008) asserts that, to fully comprehend the depth and breadth of violence and the impact it has on the ontological realities of those who fall victim to it, academia must depart from its one-dimensional view of the phenomenon. More specifically, Žižek argues that not all violence is intentional and viewing it as such limits our understanding of harmful actions that fall outside of traditional forms of violence (see Žižek, 2008), whilst also not forgetting the existence, the impact and the importance of examining interpersonal violence. To move away from reductive explanations of violence, Žižek developed the triumvirate of violence, consisting of subjective, systemic and symbolic forms of violence.

The first form of violence Žižek proposes is subjective violence, which refers to the more typical, traditional forms of interpersonal violence that are most often examined within the remit of criminological research. These types of violence have obvious intent, and the perpetrator is clearly identifiable, such as in instances of physical assault or acts of terrorism. It is undeniable that this is an important area of study due to the very real felt impact of such acts on both individuals and wider communities (Briggs *et al.*, 2021). However, Žižek (2008, p.1) argues that:

At the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict. But we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible 'subjective' violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. A step back enables us to identify a violence that sustains our very efforts to fight violence and promote tolerance.

Here, Žižek is challenging academia to reposition and broaden its understanding of violence to include less visible forms of harm that operate within our very social structures. This is important as the sole focus on interpersonal violence, at least in some capacity, is responsible

for the failure of criminology to succeed in developing a more nuanced understanding of crime, harm and victimisation (Kotzé and Lloyd, 2022, p. xiii).

To broaden the scope of violence, Žižek (2008) introduces us to the concept of objective violence, which includes systemic and symbolic types. Systemic violence is produced by the very systems that govern our everyday lives. This includes violence and harm caused by institutional policies that embrace structures of meritocracy, measures of austerity and more recently, the response to the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing financial crisis it has caused. All of which have impacted greatly on the ontological realities of young people. Žižek's final typology of violence is symbolic violence. This type of violence accounts for interactions that occur between groups or individuals that produce and reproduce harmful, dominant ideologies. This can be through physical acts, but also through both verbal and non-verbal communication (Žižek, 2008; Hourani *et al.*, 2021). Thus, allowing studies like this one to move beyond the scope of subjective violence to examine socioeconomic structures and the abstract forms of violence they produce.

Therefore, by adopting wide-angled lens to understanding violence and utilising a harm based ultra-realist approach, this study can account for the harms produced at structural, institutional and individual levels resulting from neoliberal philosophies, ideologies and economic and political imperatives. This will also shed a light on how these social structures and the harms they produce impact upon and shape the experiential realities of young people today.

**Understanding the Link Between the Wider World and Subjectivity- Transcendental Materialism:**

Ultra-realism, as seen thus far, emphasises the importance of placing harm within the context of neoliberalism, asserting that the dominant Symbolic Order and political and economic structures in society (Raymen and Kuldova, 2021) create and propagate hardened subjectivities that are capable of producing harm (Winlow and Hall, 2017; Hall and Winlow, 2015). To understand the clear connection between structural and ideological conditions and individual motivations to harm, ultra-realists draw upon Adrian Johnston's (2008) transcendental materialism, which will be the focus of this section moving forward. Unpicking this final piece of the ultra-realist theoretical framework will allow for a further understanding of, not only how harm is reproduced at an individual level, but also what it means to be a young person in today's, neoliberal society.

Transcendental materialism (Johnston 2008; Hall and Winlow 2015) provides an account of human subjectivity that incorporates the works of Jacques Lacan (2007) and Slavoj Žižek (2000). As mentioned previously, ultra-realism understands people as non-essential beings, they are neither good nor evil and are shaped by the material world around them. This is otherwise known as the transcendental materialist subject. Transcendental materialism explains how individual subjectivities are formed as a result of external factors, starting with the notion that the human brain is hard-wired for plasticity (Hall, 2012b; Johnston, 2008). Grounded in biology, Johnston (2008) asserts that subjectivity initially begins in the brain but transcends its material starting point as the subject begins to act within and interact with the world around them (Kotzé, 2021). At this point, human subjectivity can no longer be reduced to its former, purely material state. Due to the flexible nature neuronal receptors in the brain as they can break down and re-form. During this process external stimuli are absorbed, leading to a physical change in neuronal patterns. Put another way, the brain can reconstitute

and renew itself to ensure the individuals encompass dominant values, norms, language that are present within the dominant Symbolic Order, enabling them to understand and exist in the world around them (Johnston, 2008; Winlow and Hall, 2013). This ability to adapt is a defence mechanism as people must be able to acclimatise to changes in their physical environment to survive (Wakeman, 2017).

To delve deeper into these theoretical concepts and debates and frame the transcendental materialist subject, ultra-realists turn to what is termed the Lacanian tripartite register of reality, which consists of the real, the imaginary and the symbolic (Lacan, 2007). Lacan (2007) explains that when a person is born, they surface into what is described as *'the realm of the Real, an unsymbolised world of incomprehensible stimuli that leaves the subject anxious and terrified'* (Briggs et al., 2020, p.834). At the centre of subjectivity is a fundamental lack and the feeling of absence (Raymen and Kuldova, 2021). To escape this void and natural state of fear and confusion (a confrontation with the real), the subject solicits a pre-existing external Symbolic Order (the symbolic). As mentioned in the last chapter, the Symbolic Order allows people to make sense of the world, bring meaning to their experiences and ultimately inform the way in which they act, think and communicate (see Winlow and Hall, 2013; Johnston 2008; Žižek 2000). The imaginary is where identity formation begins to take place. During what Lacan terms the mirror phase, human beings develop a sense of self that is dependent on external stimuli. This shapes our understanding of the world and informs our identities and desires.

This process of soliciting the external Symbolic Order is very much a part of identity formation and it informs the way people act, think, communicate and interact with the world around them. Currently, neoliberal capitalism is the dominant Symbolic Order. As people absorb the

world around them, they begin to embody the characteristics of the dominant Neoliberal Symbolic Order, this being greed, envy, competitive individualism and self-interest among others. Nonetheless, *Kotzé and Lloyd (2022, p.22) assert that 'rather than directly determining subjectivity, the Symbolic Order's norms, values and dispositions make it more likely that subjects will embody corresponding characteristics'*. In other words, though people pertain some degree of free will, their actions, interactions, thoughts and feelings are, at least to some extent, both constrained and informed by the dominant, neoliberal Symbolic Order (Kotzé, 2025). Referring to the last chapter when outlining the approach this thesis takes to understanding youth, as the transition into adulthood is characterised by identity formation and life building, it is sensible to suggest that this is a person's life that when the Symbolic Order has the most significant influence. Though it may help young people make sense of and survive the world, it also makes them more vulnerable to embodying not just only the tenants of neoliberalism already mentioned, but also excessive consumerism, harmful ideas around bodily capital (see Gibbs, 2023), and the internalisation of notions of health and wellness (see Cederström and Spicer, 2015). All of which often negatively impact on the mental wellbeing of young people as well as their overall transition into adulthood.

This clearly demonstrates a lack of efficiency in the Symbolic Order in helping young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to build a stable life and avoid harm. In fact, the promotion of such harm on macro, micro and meso levels is a necessary function of the neoliberal Symbolic Order. This begs the question as to why young people continue to solicit the current Symbolic Order and do not actively seek a new, more efficient set of social, cultural and economic structures and values that are more effective? This is a question that final section of this chapter will try and answer.

## **Youth, the Solicitation of the Symbolic Order, and the Lack of Alternatives:**

It is understandable why young people develop these defence mechanisms to not just thrive, but to survive in the harmful conditions they find themselves in. What is harder to comprehend is why those transitioning into adulthood continue to actively solicit the neoliberal Symbolic Order despite an obvious decline in its efficiency. As seen throughout, the current dominant Symbolic Order fails to represent the ontological realities of many young people living in marginalised and deprived areas. Nonetheless, young people continue to demonstrate a complete commitment to neoliberal values, despite often falling victim to it. As Hall and Winlow (2015, p.33) put it:

so many working-class people, like turkeys voting for Christmas, reproduce the ideology of the system that exploits, oppresses, and, laterally, economically excludes them and systematically destroys their political and social worlds.

An understanding as to why young people continue to turn to the dominant Symbolic Order can be achieved by looking at the way in which neoliberalism positions itself. Instead of looking inward at systemic issues, such as the use of austerity measures or the way in which the inherent values of neoliberalism create self-interested, economically competitive subjects that contribute to these inequalities, neoliberalism places the blame on individuals for their own failure to excel in society and obtain material success (Littler, 2017). Young people begin to look inwards at themselves, otherwise known as a retreat into subjectivity (Winlow and Hall, 2013) as they place both the pressure of success and the blame for failure on themselves.

This is a result of neoliberalism's self-assertion that it is merely an economic management tool, that is entirely separate from government, culture, politics and the issues of inequality that arise within those domains (Polanyi, 1957; Duggan, 2012). Therefore, negating any real criticism or opposition to neoliberal economic authority and further removing itself away

from any responsibility from blame for the harms present in today's society. As a result, neoliberalism has managed to brand itself as the only viable way of managing the economy as it is not the system that causes inequality, it is merely a force trying to offset them. This is what Fisher (2009) terms capitalist realism. Capitalist realism refers to the idea that *'It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism'* (Fisher, 2009, p.2).

Because of this belief that neoliberalism is the only feasible choice, it is now argued that nothing exists outside of the realm of capitalism as we have entered an unprecedented era of post-politics (Hall, 2015; Hall and Winlow, 2015; Fisher, 2022). This is not to say that society is not aware of the harms produced under neoliberalism, in recent years alone the UK has seen anti-austerity, anti-covid initiatives and Black Lives Matter protests (Briggs et al., 2021). However, these protests do not demand an overhaul of the current economic structures, they merely call for a fairer version of the pre-existing system whereby the needs of those who suffer the most are more readily recognised and met (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Kotzé, 2020). When there is an absence of any feasible alternative, people cling to the only viable Symbolic Order that is presented to them which results in them settling for more fairer versions of the system already in place rather than actively seeking an entirely new way of governance (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Fisher, 2022).

Neoliberalism's dismissal of the harms and violence it produces has resulted in the experiential realities of young people largely going unrecognised and unresolved. This lack of recognition has been further maintained by the UK's entry into an era of post-politics (Hall, 2015; Hall and Winlow, 2015) as issues such as deprivation, both fiscal and other forms, would have previously been dealt with within the political sphere are now burdens placed on the

individual. Thus, further highlighting the harmful set of circumstances in which those who are transitioning into adulthood find themselves within.

It is within this context that the decision of young people in Stoke-on-Trent to stay within a city that subjects them to harm must also be considered. As documented throughout this thesis, Stoke-on-Trent is a place of disadvantage, deprivation, insecurity and precariousness. Yet for some reason, many young people within the city choose to stay, even embracing the culture of the 'potteries' despite the dwindling benefit it has to them, their security and their overall quality of life. It is with this understanding of the harms young people face today, these questions as to why it is that young people stay in such environments and the impact this has on their experiential realities as young people, that I came to consider a place I know and grew up. It is with my understanding of Stoke-on-Trent as a place that makes growing up harder than it needs to be, a place where hardship seems to be around every corner, but also as a place that I am proud of and a place I call home and will likely continue to do so for the rest of my life, that I turned to the youth of Stoke-on-Trent to begin answering these questions.

#### **Chapter 4: Methods: An Ethnographically Informed Qualitative Study**

This chapter delivers the core methodological considerations employed by this research, presenting an accurate representation of the process taken to conduct an academically rigorous examination of the lived experience of young people in Stoke-on-Trent. This includes an overview of the research questions, aims and objectives, research strategy and design, ethical considerations and data protection statement, the research sample, access and recruitment and an overview of how the data was collected and analysed. However, this thesis and I have more of a story to tell when it comes to the development of this project and what it eventually became and achieved. As a result of forced changes in the very nature and focus of this research because of the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the growing influence of my personal biography and development as an academic throughout this five-year process, this thesis has been on quite the journey.

One reason for this is how my knowledge, understanding, feelings, opinions and most notably, my own life experiences have undoubtedly impacted and shaped my research (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). It is impossible for any researcher to separate their personal biography and subjectivity from the research they conduct (Braun and Clarke, 2021a), which could not be truer for this research. However, this positionality should be acknowledged from the outset, which has been achieved in this project through imbedding reflexivity throughout. Incorporating reflexivity ensures that my personal biography is known and prompts any readers to question any potential impact it has on the approach taken to this research and the overall findings (Dean, 2017; Wincup, 2017). However, this is not all it does. Reflexivity is particularly important within ethnographic studies, like this one, where there is often a personal and physical proximity between the researcher and the research (see Braun and Clarke, 2021a; Folkes, 2022; Dean *et al.*, 2018; Atkinson *et al.*, 2007). It is not just important

as a tool for acknowledging the impact of my background on the methods employed and findings generated, but also a means of recognising how and why my positionality and proximity to this research gives me the privilege of being able to truly and honestly tell the stories of young people in Stoke-on-Trent.

That being said, the remainder of this chapter will explore the journey this research has taken to completion, starting by documenting the changing nature of the thesis because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Throughout the remainder of this chapter there will be several personal reflections that explore my personal biography and growth as an academic to demonstrate how they influenced the direction of this thesis and will highlight the methods used to conduct the research in its final form.

### **The Covid-19 Pandemic, Otherwise Known as ‘The Research Ruiner’:**

Initially, this thesis was going to be a prison ethnography, however, the Covid-19 pandemic had other ideas. In 2025, over five years after the initial lockdowns in the UK, the level of disruption the pandemic caused to all walks of life seems to have been all but forgotten. This comes as people have moved on, or perhaps more adequately put it, moved back into their old ways of life. However, the effect of the pandemic is not to be overlooked here as it has influenced and shaped this study from the very beginning. Howlett (2022, p.388) describes the level of impact the pandemic had on scholarly research:

Field studies involving immersive in-person contact have become nearly impossible for the foreseeable future. Even when a ‘new normal’ is established, many of our previously used approaches to research will likely need to be re-thought and altered, at least temporarily. As a result, many of us have been, or will be, forced to change our research plans and/or find new techniques to carry out our projects.

This presents a clear picture of just a few of the challenges faced by researchers during this time. Social and criminological researchers alike recognise that the methodological challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic ultimately changed the way much research was conducted

(Howlett, 2022; Briggs et al., 2021; Fine and Abramson, 2020) and PhD research was no exception.

Byrom (2020, p.2) found that of 4800 respondents, 78% of which were PhD candidates, three-quarters experienced the 'negative impact of the lockdown on their ability to collect data, discuss ideas and findings with colleagues, and disseminate research'. This meant that it was not only difficult to conduct fieldwork, but it was also particularly challenging to access the directional and pastoral support many PhD students need during the early years of their PhD. This disruption to research was also particularly true for qualitative, face-to-face research taking place in secure settings such as young offender institutes, as the pandemic forced all in-person research in prisons to cease completely (Maycock, 2021). As a result of the access restrictions in place, all attempts I made to enter a young offender institute were unsuccessful. Because of this and similar experiences and challenges outlined earlier in this section, I had to abandon my plan to conduct a prison ethnography and come up with an entirely new direction for my thesis, the development of which will be explored in the next section.

### **Reimagining My Thesis:**

*'Every adversity, every failure, every heartache carries with it the seed of an equal or greater benefit'*- Napoleon Hill.

The finer details of this project were ultimately born as I walked the isles of the garden centre where I worked part-time to help support myself during my master's programme and early PhD. Designing a PhD research project is never easy, but designing one in 2020/21, as mentioned earlier, was a particular challenge. The anguish caused by pandemic related challenges and the false starts it created for my PhD led to many moments where I considered leaving the PhD behind me and entering back into the world of full-time work.

It was during one of these moments that the final idea for this PhD came to me. I was moving around my department, completing my job list and pondering the work that I was doing. It was not too bad I thought, the jobs were straight forward, the days went quick and most of all, I did not have to take work home with me. In the spirit of weighing things up, however, I also began to note how the wages were low, full-time jobs were not always easy to come by, progression opportunities were available but rare and competitive and the atmosphere between colleagues and customers was not always amicable. It was in this moment that I really began to consider the environment that I was in and inspiration struck. Right in front of me there was a plethora of young people working, putting themselves through education and attempting to build their futures whilst also experiencing the inequality and instability that is seemingly amplified in Stoke-on-Trent. It was this moment, given my lived experience of growing up in the city as discussed earlier and my developing academic understanding of the harms faced by young people under neoliberalism, that this thesis became a project on the experiential realities of young people in Stoke-on-Trent as they embark on the transition into adulthood.

The methodological approach to this study in large remained the same, as a multi-method qualitative study of the impact of Covid-19 was still accomplished and as will be discussed in the next section, even expanded upon. However, the project took place within the community with a redefined focus on the impact of Covid-19 and beyond on young people aged 18-29 who reside within the deprived City of Stoke-on-Trent and surrounding areas. Despite these challenges and changes, this project remained, even perhaps became more of an important piece of research as social studies of all varieties became imperative in providing a comparable understanding of life before, during and after the pandemic (Ward, 2020).

The project therefore continued to progress, and as such the remainder of this chapter continues to examine its development as a PhD project and in doing so, outlines the core methodological considerations. This includes an outline of the project design, the methodological philosophies and research methods used to carry out this research project, although I recognise that in framing the methodology as such it perhaps post facto imposes an order on it that is more the product of convenience than the fluid and evolving way I have come to understand the issue of young people's experiential realities.

### **Research Questions and Project Aims, Objectives- A Work in Progress:**

First, the initial research questions, aims and objectives will be introduced.

Research Questions:

1. What were the social, cultural and economic implications of lockdowns?
2. What was the lived experience of young people aged 18-29 living in the deprived City of Stoke-on-Trent during lockdowns implemented in response to the Covid-19 pandemic?
3. Where do these experiences locate within the wider theoretical debate surrounding the unintentional social harms of the COVID-19 restrictions?
4. How have the social, economic and political circumstances surrounding Stoke-on-Trent and youth left young people in the city vulnerable to the impact of Covid-19 lockdowns?
5. What can the implications and harms of lockdowns tell us about the future?

Aims:

1. To explore the lived experience of young people aged 18-29 who reside within the deprived City of Stoke-on-Trent.

2. To generate an understanding of the harms caused to young people as a result of local and national lockdowns put in place during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Objectives:

1. To generate the rich data required for this study by conducting comprehensive semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations. This will allow the researcher to examine the nature of lockdowns and the impact they have had on the lived experience of young people.
2. Critically examine local and national lockdowns through the lens of the social harm perspective in order to analyse the harm they have caused to young people aged 18-29 in the deprived City of Stoke-on-Trent.

These research questions and aims however, no longer necessarily represent this research in its current form, at least not in its entirety. It is therefore important to provide the context in which these research questions, aims and objectives were initially developed and continue to document the journey that this study went through to arrive where it is today. The reflections made earlier document how, in the wake of the challenges I faced in developing a feasible project early on in this PhD process, I came to research youth in my local community. However, this was only just the start of the developmental journey for this thesis. Not only did the Covid-19 pandemic impede the progression of this study, but it also provided the initial inspiration for it. As I started my PhD in September 2020, right in the thick of the Covid-19 pandemic, this comes as no surprise. I could see all around me the impact of lockdowns. When the first lockdown started, I was completing my work experience in a young offender institute. During my last few days in the prison, measures were put into place to protect staff and inmates against the health implications of the virus as concern was mounting, procedural changes were being proposed to ensure inmates could still remain in contact with family and friends

as lockdowns became an inevitability and panic was setting in about the impact this would all have on the prison regime and prisoner mental health as movement around the prison would have to be reduced to the bare minimum (see Bateman, 2020).

Similar panic was brewing in the outside world as well. My placement ended abruptly as the prison stopped any non-essential visits and education providers of all levels largely moved their provisions online as the world shutdown. Movement of people became restricted as the government instructed people to stay at home unless medical support was required, to exercise once a day, to shop for essentials or go to work if they were considered a keyworker (Brown and Kirk-Wade, 2022). Non-essential businesses closed or moved online where possible, non-essential workers were furloughed or asked to work from home and facemasks and social distancing became compulsory in public spaces (Brown and Kirk-Wade, 2022). This all came as the government enforced lockdown rules to stop the spread of the virus and to prevent the NHS from getting overwhelmed. As seen in the timeline below, the first lockdown measures were introduced in March 2020 and, despite some periods of reduced restrictions and variants in regional rules, restrictions to varying degrees remained in place until December 2021 (see figure 4.1).

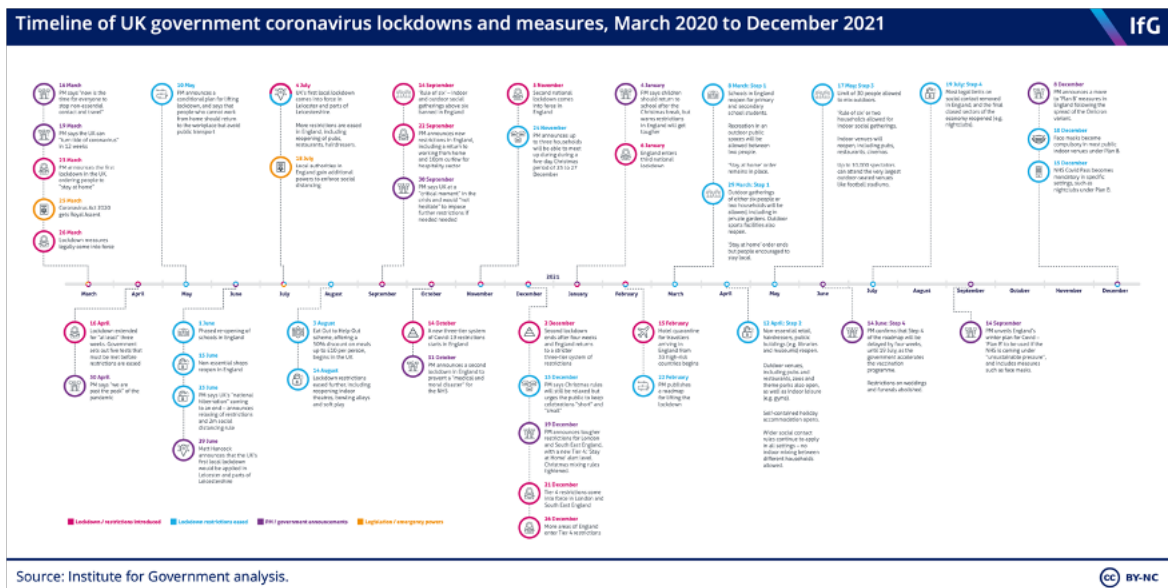


Figure 4.1. Timeline of The Covid-19 Measures in the Uk (Institute for Government, 2021).

These lockdown restrictions came with wider societal implications. To name just a few, jobs became at risk, the health and wellbeing of many was impacted negatively, stockpiling mentalities emptied the shelves and left people without ‘essential items’ like toilet paper, people engaged in heated debates surrounding the ethics of lockdown and the safeness of new Covid-19 vaccines, people broke the rules at the expense of their own physical health and that of others, divisions could be seen on the streets as disagreements arose over the enforcement of lockdown rules and sacrifices were made by many (Briggs *et al.*, 2021). As a result, research on the social, cultural and economic impact of the pandemic was imperative at the time I began my PhD Journey. My own PhD supervisor, Dr Luke Telford, was involved in such pioneering research on the pandemic and what it meant for the world (see Briggs *et al.*, 2020; 2021). Therefore, it was a logical step at the time to continue looking at the Covid-19 pandemic, despite moving from a prison ethnography to one out in the community.

It is under these conditions that the research questions, aims and objectives as they appear above were written. However, as my knowledge and understanding of the ultra-realist theoretical framework strengthened and I began to grow stronger as an academic more

generally, it became apparent that there was much more to the project than the above research questions and aims encompass. Examples of ultra-realist informed research do not necessarily draw upon or utilise traditional ideas surrounding ontology and epistemology to frame their positionality. Nonetheless, the framework still gets us thinking and questioning the nature of being and existing in this world and the ontology of human subjectivity. As seen in the previous chapter, ultra-realism contends that human subjectivity is shaped by external factors (Winlow and Hall, 2019). It is the current, dominant Symbolic Order (see Winlow and Hall, 2013; Johnston 2008; Žižek 2000), which has been explained in much more depth earlier on in this thesis, that shapes our knowledge, thought processes, actions and our experiential realities more broadly. At the start of the pandemic, ultra-realists pondered whether this would be the event to reset society, the event to end neoliberalism as the dominant overarching social structure and create meaningful social change (Briggs *et al.*, 2020). However, the pandemic was not an insular event that existed outside of these social structures, it was born into and shaped by them. The UK government's response to the pandemic, including its use of none-pharmaceutical interventions like lockdowns, was informed by neoliberal logic that prioritises the survival of the economy over anything else (Briggs *et al.*, 2021). As mentioned before, harms, albeit unintentional, arise out of the everyday operation of neoliberally informed social structures (Telford and Lloyd, 2020; Boulki and Kotzé, 2018; Hillyard and Tombs, 2017). The pandemic and subsequent response were no exception to this as they created new and heightened preexisting harms (Briggs *et al.*, 2021).

When I started to reflect more on the world in which the pandemic emerged into and was able to do so in more depth as my own academic abilities improved, I began to see this project in a broader light. It was never just about the pandemic alone. It is about what the pandemic

told us about the wider tenants of society and the harms caused by the current neoliberal Symbolic Order. This does not mean that the Covid-19 pandemic has disappeared from this study entirely, in fact it is still very much a cornerstone of the project. As mentioned previously, the examination of pivotal societal events is imperative when understanding the experiential realities of young people (see Campbell (1993)). These events allow us to see more clearly the impact of overarching social structures as they are tested to the maximum, making the harms they present more visible. Thus, rendering them as a good vessel to use to examine and understand the lives of young people under neoliberalism. This became even more evident during the data collection process when I began to see, through questions on the impact of the pandemic, the vast extent to which the experiential realities of young people and their transitions into adulthood are shaped by both the pandemic and wider neoliberal logic and philosophies.

Therefore, it is fair to suggest that the initial research questions and aims outlined above still stand, at least to a certain degree. This research examined the social, cultural and economic implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, more specifically the use of lockdowns. In the context of the pandemic, it still offers a thorough insight into the experiential realities of young people, and the local nuances of Stoke-on-Trent are at the centre of this research. However, it also moved away from merely questioning the nature of the pandemic, scrutinising the UK governments use of none-pharmaceutical interventions and placing that in the context of youth and the impact it had on their experiential realities in the immediate aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. This thesis became much bigger and much more of an important project than that. This research and its findings are interpreted and presented in a way that provides a wider, revitalised, insight into youth and what it really means to be a young person transitioning into adulthood in today's neoliberal society. It took the data and examined it

through the wide-angled lens offered by a harm-based ultra-realist framework to document what has become a precarious, unstable, harmful and extended state for many young people transitioning into adulthood in places like Stoke-on-Trent. As mentioned previously; in doing so, this study has closed the gap in youth studies and ultra-realist literature and presented a novel, original piece of research.

The remainder of this chapter will explore the practical steps taken to answer these research questions, meet the aims and objectives of the study and see the overall project to completion.

### **Research Strategy and Design- An Ethnographically Informed Qualitative Study:**

To fully and adequately capture the experiential realities of young people today, an ethnographically informed qualitative approach was employed. According to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.1), there is no widely accepted definition of ethnography and ‘the label is not used in an entirely standard fashion; its meaning can vary’. However, most ethnographically informed studies typically comprise of two or more forms of data collection to generate rich data that provides insight into the issues being explored (Treadwell, 2020; Haddow, 2022). As such, to capture the complex nature of youth before, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, a multi-method qualitative approach to data collection was employed (Wincup, 2017).

The data required for this study was collected via both semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations, both of which play a vital role in ethnographically informed research. Semi-structured interviews not only allow for the collection of in-depth data that captures the experiential realities of the participants, but they can also be used as a tool to gain clarification when the researcher does not fully comprehend what they had observed and vice versa (Treadwell, 2020). Furthermore, Wincup (2017) points out that multi-method

approaches give a clearer insight into any variations in experience that may occur within the setting being observed. For this research, this meant that I was able to understand the variances in the way that young people in Stoke-on-Trent viewed success and how the varying level of connection young people have with their locale may have a bearing on this. Utilising a multi-method approach therefore allowed me to make sense of the nuanced and complex nature of my participants lived realities and produce the rich and complex data required to develop a comprehensive understanding of current overarching social structures, including the Covid-19 lockdowns and beyond, and the impact they have on young people in Stoke-on-Trent.

Nonetheless, ethnography is not merely just a form of data collection, it is an approach that informs every phase of a piece of research (Treadwell, 2020). Ploder and Hamman (2020, p.3) state that:

‘Ethnographic research is the product of multiple practices. It is an assemblage of seeing and looking, hearing and listening, handling objects, describing, interviewing, recording, reading, documenting, and working with data—transcribing, storing, transforming, sharing, labelling, coding, sequencing, comparing, interpreting, visualizing, and quoting—as well as many other practices. They occur in all stages of the ethnographic research process and in a broad variety of social settings including fieldwork sites, data sessions, seminars, conferences, and the writing desk’.

Ethnography is therefore embedded in every aspect of this study, from recognising its methodological importance in the first literature review, to the presentation of the data and overall thesis.

It is very well understood that ethnographically informed qualitative research is a messy and complex process, whereby the research steps are intertwined and often repeated (Treadwell, 2020; Ploder and Hamman, 2020). This is a fact that I vastly underestimated as I embarked on this research. In my naivety as a novice researcher, I initially proposed that I would be using the Hutter-Hennink Qualitative Research Cycle (see figure 4.2) to help me stay regimented

until completion. This was met with some surprise and words of wisdom from my supervisory team as they advised that it is not possible to 'tidy up' ethnographically informed research in such a way. As seen from the reflections made throughout this section so far, they were correct in the feedback and warnings they provided. The design phase never really had a clear beginning or end point. I never actively revisited the official project design; it developed more organically than that over time. The same can be said about the establishment of the theoretical framework, the data collection, the development of codes and themes from the data and the write up of the entire thesis. They were all steps taken to ensure the progress of this research and cycles like the one below (see figure 4.2) can be used as a check list to ensure nothing gets forgotten about. Nonetheless, it was messy, iterative and much less of a forced process than I initially would have liked it to have been. This was therefore a process that I did not always find easy. I like routine and to be fully organised with all tasks meticulously planned out, hence the plight to find a cycle or framework that would help me create a clear plan all the way to graduation. I often felt like I was not a real researcher or that I was not doing my research correctly because I had no clear system in place. The fact that my project grew and changed over time also made me feel like I had failed to create a solid project to begin with. However, I eventually came to learn that this is the case for many PhD students, that it is just a necessary part of academic growth and is vital for an in-depth qualitative, ethnographically informed study.

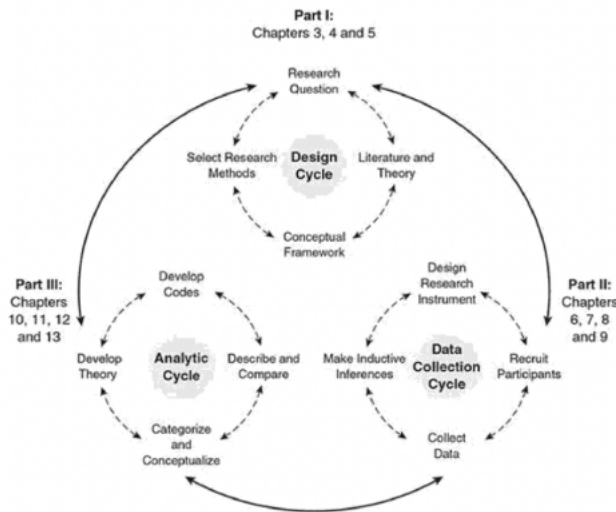


Figure 4.2. Hutter-Hennink Qualitative Research Cycle (Hennink *et al.*, 2020, pp.4).

Aside from the messy process that comes with conducting qualitative research, which could be perceived as a strength or a drawback, there are inherent limitations associated with this type of research that should be brought to attention. One of the main criticisms of qualitative research methods is that they are more likely than quantitative research to be informed by the internal perspective of the researcher (Queirós *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, there is a higher potential for researcher bias to present within qualitative research. Nevertheless, concerns around researcher proximity and bias have been addressed in other sections throughout this chapter.

The use of a single methodology within social research has also come under scrutiny. Choy (2014) argues that although both qualitative and quantitative approaches alone can be suitable, the use of a mixed methodology can provide a higher standard of results. However, despite the criticisms, Deeptee and Roshan (2009) argue that the use of qualitative research methods is on the rise due to the inability of quantitative methods to explain some social phenomena, such as the ones focal to this study. The use of qualitative ethnography as a singular research tool is especially becoming ever more popular among social scientists, in

particular, criminologists (Bryman, 2016; Wincup, 2017). This can be attributed to its promotion of multiple methods, mostly fieldnotes, ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews (Treadwell, 2020), which allow for an in-depth understanding of various social phenomenon.

Therefore, a multi-method qualitative approach was selected to ensure that the complex nature of the research questions could be addressed adequately (Kelemen and Rumens, 2012). As such, utilising a qualitative, multi-method, ethnographically informed research design allowed me to use observed structures, activities and meanings as data in addition to the data collected through semi-structured interviews. This provided a more in-depth insight into the issues concerned within the study (Brewer, 2000), in this case, neoliberally informed social structures and events like the Covid-19 pandemic on the experiential realities of those entering adulthood.

The remaining sections will therefore provide an overview of how the qualitative data needed for this study was collected and handled, including access to participants, the sample, a more detailed overview of the methods of data collection and the steps taken to analyse the data collected. However, beforehand, a reflection on my life is provided to demonstrate why I am positioned well to conduct this study and highlight the benefit my positionality has had on the research process.

### **My Personal Biography: Positionality, Justification and What it Means for this Study:**

I grew up in a small three-bedroom terrace house in Fenton, a town in the South of Stoke-on-Trent. Well, grew up is perhaps not the right way to phrase it. At 30-years old, at the time of writing this, I was finishing up my PhD, trying to build a life for myself and still living at home with my mum, step-dad, little brother, sister-in-law, partner, four cats and my French Bulldog,

Peaches. I always thought that my very obvious 'failure' to thrive as an adult and my lack of ability to build a stable life with a house, a husband and a family was somewhat a cruel irony given the nature of my PhD. But it is not ironic at all, it is why I ended up here in the first place, as this is the reality for many young adults today. So, this next section is my story, what puts me at the heart of this thesis and positions me well to truly and accurately present the stories and the experiential realities of young people, particularly those in Stoke-on-Trent.

I live in an old industrial neighbourhood where the houses all look the same, run down and are situated in unified rows. My grandparents once told me that this was a product of convenience as the pottery factories were often located at the end of the rows to allow easy access for workers. This is visibly apparent as just outside of my window, the remains of one of the many pottery factories can be seen. To no surprise to anyone whose family lineage is in Stoke-on-Trent, my nan once worked in the factories as a fettler and sponger. She was, in many ways, the start of my inspiration for this study, long before I even knew it. For a start, she thoroughly enjoyed learning, a notion she passed down to me. In fact, she was the first woman in our family to stay in education beyond the age of 15 and continued taking night classes in Spanish until her early 60s. Mostly, however, my nan had a love of history and to tell stories about our family's past. Even into my teenage years, I repeatedly asked for the story of how my great, great uncles opened a draw bridge that led to my great, great grandmother falling into the Caldon Canal. She was subsequently rescued via a horse and a rope and had to walk through the chip shop she owned 'dripping' wet. It was these stories that not only connected me to my own family history, but also to that of my city, resulting in a deep interest in the city that I grew up in, its industrial heritage and the charms it possesses. However, growing up in Stoke-on-Trent was not always easy and romanticising the city without presenting its obvious flaws would be disingenuous. As previously mentioned, I am a

'Fentonite'. A fun fact about Fenton, not only is it in the forgotten city of Stoke-on-Trent, but it is also the forgotten town, in a forgotten city. Arnold Bennett (1902), a local author from Hanley, wrote the novel 'Ann of the Five Towns' about the city. However, there are in fact six towns, but Bennett chose to omit Fenton as he believed 'Five Towns' sounded better. Thus, Fenton became known as the 'forgotten town', a label that I feel represents the area well from my own experiences. Do not get me wrong, Fenton has its charm, there are lots of green spaces, the town and local churches host an array of community events and there were once several pubs scattering the streets. However, aside from that, there always seemed to be very little going on here in Fenton. No real nighttime economy or theatres like in Hanley, nowhere near as many restaurants as Stoke Town has, no football clubs like Burslem and no big shopping precincts like Longton and Tunstall. Though it is apparent that the other five towns have not necessarily benefitted from the more consumer focused developments mentioned above, it felt like Fenton was never really in the game to begin with.

The lack of things to do in the town also meant that many of my friends and I found ourselves meeting up at local parks and engaging in behaviour like drinking and smoking. On one such night, at the age of 13, three friends and I were attacked on our way home. One perpetrator came from in-front, the other from behind. Though I encountered no physical harm, two friends were left with facial injuries. This led to lengthy criminal proceedings and subsequent issues with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. However, this was not the only time I have been a victim of crime after having my phone stolen from my school bag, twice, and having my house burglarised, three times. On one of the occasions my house was broken into and burglarised, my family and I were present in the home, albeit sleeping. This was far scarier of an experience than I could have imagined prior to the event.

It is for this reason that I recognise the importance of research that acknowledges and exemplifies the impact of crime and violence on the experiential realities of young people as such events have had a very real impact on my own life. Though I have largely managed to 'stay on the straight and narrow', there have been times where this may not have been the outcome. This is so much so, that the first thing my friend's dad said to me when I landed on my PhD was 'I bet you never expected to be the girl to go this far'. There are several events that could have led me down a different route in life, including drinking heavily as a teenager, being propositioned by men twice my age, declining a 'key' of cocaine at a wedding when I was 15, being grounded on the day my friends went out shop lifting and attending an afternoon school club at the time a large fight broke out just outside my school. Like many others in the city, these events could have easily led to me becoming a criminal, a victim, a school dropout, an alcoholic or drug addict. If I had made slightly different decisions, or in most cases, I had not been in the right place at the right time, my story could be a much different one. These events ultimately demonstrate the fine line that many young people in Stoke-on-Trent tread between becoming a victim and an offender.

Nonetheless, though I acknowledge that my encounters with crime and victimisation have impacted on my life in some very big ways, they only make up a small proportion of events that have truly shaped my daily life and transition into adulthood. It has been my time in education and work, the experiences I have had with peers and colleagues and the effect of today's socioeconomic structures that have had the most bearing on my life. In other words, it is the everyday mundane experiences that most, if not all young people, encounter that have truly had the most effect on my lived realities.

Though I had some undeniably fun times and learning experiences during my school years I was often relentlessly bullied by my peers for the way I looked and dressed, the things I owned

and the way I acted. Little did they know that my stepdad had been diagnosed with cancer and with that, the main household income was cut dramatically. My parents were informed at the time that my stepdad had the 'wrong type of cancer' to receive any type of government assistance. This meant that my family and I often had to go without luxuries like the newest clothes or latest technology and, at one of the lowest points, we had to resort to foodbanks for food and other essentials.

Aside from the bullying, my educational attainment always fell short of the expectations of my school and college. I did not obtain the GCSEs I needed for the A-Level courses I wanted to take, so I had to do an additional year of GCSEs at college. I then failed my first year of A-levels, which ultimately ended my lifelong dream of becoming a history teacher and prolonged my time at college even longer. This extended stay in Further Education had me questioning my own value and my ability to build a stable and successful future for myself as I believed that all my potential and worth was attached to my success in education. This came with a profound impact on my mental health, which was solidified even further with a visit to the careers team at college who advised me that *'I should not even be doing A-Levels, let alone considering going to university'*.

Despite the advice received, I tried the university route anyway. Again, I felt that this was the only path to show my worth, climb the ladder, obtain a stable job and begin to meet the milestones indicative of entering adulthood. Despite my below average grades, I was accepted by Staffordshire University and successfully completed an undergraduate degree in law. To make some extra money and gain valuable experience in the world of work, during my time at university I began working with children and young people in the community, predominantly as a sports coach and youth engagement worker. My work experience allowed me to engage with a vast amount of young people across Stoke-on-Trent from a wide array

of social, cultural and economic backgrounds. Many children and young people I have worked with share similar stories of financial and social hardship, inequality, deprivation and instability. Thus, making it very apparent to me that, no matter their background, young people in Stoke-on-Trent often cannot escape the harmful conditions fostered by the city and wider social, political, cultural and economic structures.

However, my time in this industry was not always positive, in fact it was extremely detrimental to my physical and mental health. As the funding for many youth and sports projects heavily relied on government funding and charitable donations, my role was never a secure one. I spent four years on various zero hour and short fixed-term contracts that offered up a plethora of insecurity and instability. My hours would change from week to week, I was left without work in quieter periods, and I had no rights or protections if I was to fall ill. There was some benefit to these working arrangements, especially when I was still studying as I could decline hours during periods of assessment, however, this was just the start of long-term insecurity that still characterises my life at 30-years-old.

The most secure position I got whilst engaged in youth work was a full-time fixed-term contract that I received upon completing my undergraduate degree. This, at the time, felt like I had hit the jack pot. My first full-time job and they had approached me. Though the wages were close to minimum wage, I was finally able to build savings for my first home and really begin thinking about my future. However, this was not meant to be. Given the nature of the work, permanent contracts were not handed out often. This meant that every 12 months my employers had to decide whether I would get another contract, whether I was doing a good enough job or whether there was the funding to keep me on. This in itself was stressful, but the rumours that others were let go with no notice or conversation when their contracts came

to an end, put the pressure on even more. This instilled a permanent sense of insecurity within me that I do not think has ever left.

However, insecurity and instability were only the start of the problem. Despite the charitable nature of youth work and its promotion of positive societal changes, the working conditions do not always match these philosophies. After all, it is still a business, and profit was still put over people. There was very little room for wage negotiation, despite the late nights, long hours and emotional toll this line of work often comes with. Promotions were also far and few in between and the insecurity of the sector promoted a culture of competitiveness that I became a victim of on several occasions. When this competitive behaviour began to impact on me and my work, very little was offered in the way of support for me or warning for the colleagues involved. It was this culture that eventually brought me out of the sector entirely and back into higher education.

This essentially provides a summary of my life up to now and any important information missing has either already been covered or will be covered in future reflections. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, my background and experiences as a working-class young person in Stoke-on-Trent places me in a unique position to be able to truly and honestly tell the stories of other young people in the city as I have experienced much of it firsthand. This proximity also gave me access to the participants and aided in ethnographic process, which will be discussed after a statement on ethics and data protection is provided.

#### **Ethics and Data Protection:**

This research conforms with the University of Staffordshire Ethical Review Policy and active steps were taken at the design stage to prevent any foreseen harm to participants. Participant autonomy and informed consent was secured using participant invitation letters, information sheets and consent forms, which were administered and retrieved prior to any involvement

in the study. Participants were made fully aware of the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw, within reason, from the project up to three months after their interview, meaning that consent was taken without duress (Denscombe, 2014). Participants were made aware of the general nature of the questions prior to interview and were offered the opportunity to review or discuss the interview schedule if they wished to do so. To ensure my practice remained open and honest, participants were read a debrief sheet and provided with a hard copy at the end of the interview (Allen, 2017). The debrief included information regarding the participants right to withdraw, how they can withdraw, the complaints procedure and how they can access support if needed. The latter was provided in case any sensitive topics discussed throughout the interview impacted on the wellbeing of the participant.

Participants were informed of their right to confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study. Participant confidentiality was upheld, and all personal details remained anonymous outside of the research team (Wiles, *et al.*, 2008). All data was processed in accordance with data protection laws and complied with the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR). The data collected was only shared amongst the research team. All electronic data was stored safely in a password protected OneDrive file. To further protect the identity of participants, pseudonyms were used for publication purposes, and any identifiable data was not included in interview transcripts. Research participants were able to request a copy of their transcripts to review the level of confidentiality and anonymity given to them, though no reason was required for a request to be made. Hard copies were stored in a locked cabinet only I had access to. In accordance with the Staffordshire University policy on handling data, all data will be kept for 10 years. During this time, a data transfer agreement will be in place which will

ensure that data continues to be held in compliance with UK data protection standards (GDPR).

The risk this study posed to me was considered low and no harm arose during the data collection period. Nonetheless, my supervisors were always informed when I was conducting interviews. Also, due to the potential distressing nature of the interviews and my proximity to the topics of discussion, debrief sessions were always available with my supervisors if needed. Ethical approval was obtained before any potential participants were contacted or any data was collected, the process of which is detailed in the following sections.

#### **Access and Recruitment:**

Given my background and biography, I drew upon my own personal contacts to gain access to initial research participants. My background means that I have been to school with, worked with and remained friends with many young people in Stoke-on-Trent whose lives have been shaped by the harms of neoliberalism before, after and during of the Covid-19 pandemic. This ultimately gave me access to the participants needed for initial interviews and allowed me to more easily develop a rapport with those I interviewed and observed (Jorgensen, 1989). This is a common and readily used approach in qualitative research like this one (see Holdsworth 2017, Emmel *et al.*, 2007).

Personal contacts were contacted face to face, via text and through social media outlets to generate interest in the study. As mentioned above, all potential participants were then provided with a letter of invitation and a participant information sheet and if they wished to continue with the study, an interview was scheduled, and written consent was obtained. To ensure that the sample transgressed personal contacts, snowball sampling was utilised as participants were asked to support the recruitment process by recommending the study to others who met the inclusion criteria (Babbie, 2008). Snowball sampling is well established

and utilised within qualitative data collection as it assists the researcher in meeting the required sample size (Parker, Scott and Geddes, 2019). This proved true as the use of personal contacts and snowball sampling were successful as they generated 25 interviews, 21 of which took place during a scheduled data collection period between August 2022 and September 2022.

However, as expected, there were several issues encountered during the data collection stage of this study in relation to the recruitment of participants. Many participants did not consider any of their personal contacts to be suitable for an interview, therefore, the sample often failed to snowball (Geddes *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, there were also several instances when potential participants would express an interest, but communication would cease before an interview date was confirmed. Moreover, on two occasions participants cancelled on short notice. These setbacks and cancellations often caused feelings of frustration and defeat and took up valuable time during the data collection phase of the study (Telford, 2022).

Furthermore, upon reflection, it was evident that solely utilising my own personal biography and snowballing to gain access to research participants would not allow the study to adequately represent the wide array of differing demographics present within Stoke-on-Trent. This included those of varying race, ethnicity and religion, which is often an issue experienced when using these sampling techniques (Parker, Scott and Geddes, 2019). In response to this identified limitation, several community groups were contacted to assist in participant access. Moreover, various faith groups across the City of Stoke-on-Trent were also contacted to help generate further participation. This is a sampling technique used successfully by Dedryver and Knai (2021) in their qualitative research surrounding social isolation in young adults during Covid-19 lockdowns. Unfortunately, despite best efforts, these attempts to diversify the sample were unsuccessful. Additionally, the final interview sample contained an uneven

gender split. The sample consists of one participant who identifies as non-binary, eight participants who identify as male and sixteen participants who identify as female.

The sample therefore lacked both generalisability and representation, which are characteristics that are synonymous with snowball sampling (Parker, Scott and Geddes, 2019). However, as argued by Telford and Lloyd (2020), qualitative research is not required to be generalisable to the wider population. Instead, qualitative research must be analytically generalisable whereby empirical findings can, in turn, be placed within wider theoretical debates and duplicated in subsequent studies within the same remit (Telford, 2022). This also validates the research and the methodologies used as replicability is an indicator of validity (Braun and Clarke, 2021a).

#### **The Research Sample:**

To answer the research questions, aims and objectives, a purposive sampling technique was employed whereby participants were selected based on the following, specific inclusion criteria:

- Young people aged 18-29
- Residing within the City of Stoke-on-Trent or local areas during the lockdown period

The initial main aim of this research was to capture the experience of young people residing in Stoke-on-Trent or the immediate surrounding areas during Covid-19 lockdowns. The focus of the sample criteria on lockdowns raised concerns over whether this would allow for the broader interpretation of the research questions, aims and objectives outlined earlier in this chapter to be met. However, studies on the broader impact of the Covid-19 pandemic play a crucial part in developing a wider understanding of the bearing of neoliberally informed social structures and the ideologies and philosophies they promote (see Ward, 2020; Briggs *et al.*,

2021). As such, despite there being a clear focus on lockdowns in the inclusion criteria, this did not impede the studies ability to take a broader approach to understanding youth.

As seen throughout the first literature review on the state of youth, the entrance into adulthood is ever expanding (See Arnett, 2006a; Wood *et al.*, 2018; Hayward, 2024). For this reason, the age range of 18-29 was chosen to truly demonstrate the prolonged period of transition and instability. Additionally, the limited in-depth empirical investigation into post-industrial places like Stoke-on-Trent inspired the specific focus on space (see Telford, 2022). Understanding the nuances of Stoke-on-Trent and the impact this has on the experiential realities of young people is a core component of this study, making the 2<sup>nd</sup> inclusion criteria vital for this research. Overall, the sample outlined allowed for the collection of the data needed for this study.

Although, there is no consensus on what constitutes an adequate qualitative sample size, a sample size between 12-60 participants is considered sufficient (Baker and Edwards, 2012) when conducting qualitative interviews. Although a sample size as small as 12 can be adequate for some studies, it is not always enough to meet the needs of all research. Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) asserts that if comparing the experiences of a group of people is part of the research, then merely aiming for a sample that is small and easy to obtain would not yield the in-depth and reliable data required. Therefore, to gain a thorough and inclusive understanding of the experiential realities of young people, the initial aim was to conduct 30, 45-minute semi-structured interviews.

However, this was not achieved as only 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Two of which were not utilised as they fell outside of the initial inclusion criteria. As discussed in more detail earlier on in this section, my own personal contacts were exhausted, and the snowball sample ceased to roll and generate participation towards the end of the data

collection phase (Geddes *et al.*, 2018). As experienced by other researchers conducting both qualitative and ethnographic studies, tiredness and frustration began to set in as the data collection and fieldwork progressed and participant generation became more difficult and time-consuming (Telford, 2022). Therefore, a decision was made to cease recruitment of participants for interviews. However, while the planned sample size was not achieved, saturation was attained. Though it is largely understood that saturation is one of the most important factors in deciding on an adequate sample size as it is imperative in relation to the reliability of qualitative research, what constitutes saturation is disputed (Lowe *et al.*, 2018). However, the consensus is that saturation is obtained when collecting ‘more data will not lead to discovery of more information related to the research questions’ (Lowe *et al.*, 2018, p.191), which is believed to be the case when interviews ceased for this study. This is supported by the fact the data collected enabled this study to go above and beyond what it initially aimed to achieve.

The final sample therefore consisted of 23 young people from Stoke-on-Trent and surrounding areas. Below is a table pertaining participant background and employment information:

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Known Background Information	Known Employment History
Simon	Male	26	Simon lives with his partner and her family. After graduating during the pandemic, he decided to pursue a role in retail due to the difficulties of securing a post-graduate job role in the city.	Simon works as a supervisor in retail. Simon also has a background as a youth worker and sports coach.
Paul	Male	23	Paul grew up in the city and has lived in the same area most of his life. He is proud of his local area and the history and heritage of the city.	Student

Marie	Female	27	Marie has lived in and around Stoke-on-Trent most of her life, seeing and living within many areas of the city. She lives with her partner of approximately 10 years and was saving to buy a house prior to the Covid-19 pandemic.	Marie works three jobs as a hairdresser in a salon, a mobile hairdresser and in a chip-shop.
Eddie	Male	20	Eddie is amongst the youngest participants in the study. He was a student for most of the pandemic, with the lockdowns impacting on his education. Eddie lives at home with his parents and sister.	Eddie is a student whilst also doing some work in retail to generate an income.
Steve	Male	25	Steve moved to Stoke-on-Trent at just two years old. Steve grew up and went to school in the north of the city. He is a carer for his mum who he lives with.	Steve works in education, previously working in a residential care home and in retail.
Sarah	Female	22	Sarah has worked in retail for a few years. She lives in a flat with her mum and is close with her family.	Retail
Lily	Female	21	Lily lives with her parents and younger brother. Prior to the pandemic she worked part-time in retail. She likes to socialise with friends and family and to go out drinking.	Retail
Peter	Male	23	Peter lives at home with his parents and brother. He left education during the pandemic to pursue full-time employment.	Retail
Heidi	Female	29	Hiedi is a married mother of one. She has been married for six years and had her son when she was young.	Heidi worked for the NHS at the time of interview, though afterwards she moved to a secretary position.
Layla	Female	27	Layla is a recent homeowner. During the pandemic she lived with her partner and family.	Layla works as a laboratory technician.

			She likes to spend her spare time with friends, going to the gym and walking.	
Alex	Female	27	Alex grew up in the city and though she moved away for university, she moved back to Stoke-on-Trent to pursue her career. She lived with her parents until she brought her own house during the Covid-19 pandemic.	Alex now works in the education sector. Prior and during the pandemic she worked in a library.
Taylor	Female	21	Taylor recently finished her undergraduate degree. She lives at home with her mum. She spends much of her time at home, university or work, whilst socialising on occasion.	Taylor has worked in several jobs in the service industry, notably within cafés and restaurants.
Mike	Male	26	After going straight into an apprenticeship at 16, Mike recently undertook a master's degree as a mature student.	Mike has had several roles, many of which were in the service economy. Alongside being a sports coach Mike worked for a fast-food chain, Amazon and in a travel money shop.
Stacey	Female	29	Stacey is a parent/ stepparent of three. She spent much of the pandemic furloughed and caring for her children as her partner was a keyworker.	Stacey has had several jobs in both retail and the wider service economy since turning 16.
Harry	Male	19	Harry lives at home with his parents and brother. He built a home gym during the pandemic and describes the experience of lockdowns as being quite positive for him.	Harry works as an IT technician for a law firm, previously working in retail.
Phil	Male	29	Phil is currently a stay-at-home parent. He has two young children, one of which was a newborn at the start of the pandemic.	Previous role in retail.

Ken	Non-Binary	25	Ken lives with their mother. Ken was a university student before the start of the pandemic.	Student
Nancy	Female	26	Nancy lives at home with her parents, partner and young child. She had a baby during the pandemic.	Retail
Katie	Female	27	Katie is a student and a parent of two young children. Katie embarked on her degree as a mature student.	Student
Emma	Female	28	Emma moved to Stoke-on-Trent when she was 18-years old. She lives with her grandparents and continues to live in Stoke-on-Trent after finishing University.	Emma works in human resources. Previous roles include bar work and other jobs within the service economy.
Chloe	Female	22	Chloe was born in Stoke-on-Trent and lives with her parents and brother. During the pandemic she juggled working in retail and her veterinary studies.	Veterinary student and retail worker.
Kiera	Female	26	Kiera is a stay-at-home parent who looks after her son who has additional needs. She is close to her family who have always lived nearby.	Kiera previously had a non-teaching role in a local school.
Anna	Female	28	Anna moved to Stoke-on-Trent around 7 years ago from outside of the UK. Anna is an avid sports player and a homeowner.	Anna has worked in education. Prior to the pandemic Anna also worked as a sports coach.

## Data Collection

### Semi-Structured Interviews:

As widely utilised in ethnographically informed qualitative research, semi-structured participant interviews were used to collect the majority share of the data needed for this study (Treadwell, 2020). This method of data collection was selected specifically due to the ability of semi-structured interviews to help 'elicit participants experiences' (Suhail, Iqbal and Smith, 2021, p.559), which was paramount for this study on the experiential realities of young people before, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

One limitation of qualitative interviewing is that to fully achieve this aim of eliciting the rich data required, the researcher must be effective and competent. Kvale (1996) states that researchers should embody the following ten attributes to be able to conduct a prosperous interview: knowledgeable, structured, clear, gentle, sensitive, open, steering, critical remembering and interoperating. These are skills that I actively sort to attain and develop through post graduate training courses that focused on researcher attributes and research methods to ensure that a high standard of data could be elicited. However, as expected, and like many researchers new to qualitative interviewing, there were some mistakes made in the early stages of the data collection phase (see Gesch-Karamanlidis, 2015). During the very first interviews, my ability to adequately steer participants through follow up questions was limited (Kvale, 1996; Roulston *et al.*, 2003). Though I often noticed when more detail or clarity was needed, I felt I did not have the confidence or in-depth knowledge to ask follow up questions that ventured away from the initial interview schedule. Upon recognising this issue, I began to reassure myself that I was the expert in the field and to trust my instincts and training as a researcher, which led to more occasions where I would actively steer the conversation during interviews. Over time my confidence and overall ability as a researcher

grew, which was evident upon reviewing the interview recordings and transcripts as they pertained the in-depth data needed for this study (Frels, and Onwuegbuzie, 2012).

Another way in which this study attempted to obtain the in-depth data required was through the structuring of the interview questions. As informed by Suhail, Iqbal and Smith (2021), who examined the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health of young people in India, a funnelling technique was used when designing the semi-structured interview schedule. As such interviews started off by asking the participants to tell me a little bit about themselves and what their lives looked like before the Covid-19 lockdowns. The interview questions then became progressively more specific covering various topics including transformations in their routine, access to support, their experiences of work and education and how they engage with consumer culture. This allowed for the interview questions to start broad and become narrower and more detailed as the interview progressed.

Ultimately, these interview techniques worked well for this study. The data collected answered the initial research questions and as discussed previously, allowed this research to broaden its scope. Though a strict structure is not required of a qualitative interview schedule (Wincup, 2017), this approach created consistency throughout all the interviews yet provided enough flexibility to allow for rich data to materialise (O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2020). Therefore, the use of comprehensive semi-structured interviews and the funnelling interview techniques aided the process of obtaining the in-depth data that is synonymous with qualitative ethnographies and ensured that I developed a thorough understanding of the lived experience of those being studied (Treadwell, 2020).

However, several practical issues were encountered whilst conducting the interviews. The choice of location was at the discretion of the interviewee to aid their comfort and ensure the interviews remained as convenient as possible. Therefore, interviews were conducted in

several settings and locations, including cafés, the homes of the participants (where a previous connection was already established), hireable spaces, and in my office at the University of Staffordshire (Haddow, 2022; Edwards and Holland, 2013). One concern that arose with conducting the interviews in a public spaces, was the issue of privacy (Edwards and Holland, 2013). However, as with all interviews that took place, the nature of the questions were discussed with the participants in a briefing prior to the commencement of the interview. During this time, I asked all participants if they were comfortable with going ahead with the interview, which gave them the opportunity to inform me of any concerns with specific questions or the location of the interview.

Furthermore, although the initial plan was for interviews to take place face-to-face, two interviews took place online via Teams. This was at the convenience of the interviewees, both of whom were working part-time alongside full-time education, which made organising an in-person interview difficult. Due to perceived limitations pertaining to online interviewing, there was some question about the quality of data that would be collected due to the lack of ability to adequately read the body language of the participant and the capacity to build a rapport (De Villiers, Farooq, Molinari, 2021). However, as seen in Archibald *et al.* (2019), this was not the case as the use of video technology meant that I could still see and respond to the body language and facial expressions of the participants. This aided the discussion and created rich data in a similar way to face-to-face interviews. Due to technological advancements, interviews conducted via online platforms are no longer thought to hinder the ability to build rapport between the participant and the interviewer in the same way they used to (Jenner and Myers, 2019). This was further facilitated by the fact that I had a pre-existing connection with both participants who interviewed online, therefore, a rapport was already established.

### Ethnographic Observations:

Early in the data collection process my supervisors advised that I engaged in a walk/ drive through of Stoke-on-Trent to get an even clearer understanding of the city I grew up in. It is during this initial scan of Stoke-on-Trent and its six towns that I come to truly realise the importance of accounting for the local area when trying to paint an adequate picture of the experiential realities of young people. The first thing that struck me was the pockets of wealth within the city. Trentham, lightwood, Meir Hay and Meir Park are all areas known to be amongst the most affluent in the city. These areas are characterised by green spaces, larger, semi-detached houses with gardens, better roads and clear streets. These areas are the exception to the deprivation rule in Stoke-on-Trent and seeing them in this new light put the rest of the city into a new perspective for me. Takeaways, abandoned shops, pot-hole ridden roads, homelessness, small terrace houses lined up in rows of over 20, dark back alley ways that are gated as a clear method of crime prevention and streets that have fallen victim to fly tipping are more common findings across the city. As someone who grew up in one of the less affluent areas, I became accustomed to what it was like. Not seeing it as deprived or dilapidated, just seeing it as home and not really questioning its current state. Yet, seeing both sides of what the city has to offer, in tandem, when really looking at it for what it is, the stark contrast between the almost two different worlds really jumped out to me. I then began to not only question how much of an impact the physical environment has on young people as a result of the living conditions it presents, but what the wider environment tells us about the opportunities and amenities that are available to young people in the city and what it means for their transition into adulthood.

That being said, the second method utilised to obtain the data required to answer the research questions was ethnographic observations. Due to its ability to help capture social

change and the impact it can have on society, ethnographically informed research has been adopted to study issues pertaining to the pandemic and the broader field of social harm (Briggs *et al.*, 2021; Telford and Lloyd, 2020; Canning, 2020). Therefore, data for this study was collected through observations of events, social structures, and the physical environment within the research site of Stoke-on-Trent (Marshall and Rossman, 1989). However, I did not merely remain a silent observer during the fieldwork stage of the study. In fact, as often utilised by qualitative researchers and ethnographers (Briggs *et al.*, 2021; Korobov, 2018; Roberts and Sanders, 2015), informal conversations with the community of Stoke-on-Trent became a seminal part of the data collection phase.

The observation process was informed by Spradley (1980), which highlights the concept of grand tour observations and mini tour observations. To start, I began by conducting grand tour observations, which were mostly unstructured and covered a broad spectrum of interests (Spradley, 1980). This includes observations of the way in which poverty is visible within the city, the erosion of social spaces and the fragmentation of the city's towns. Grand tour observations took place in Longton, Burslem, Fenton, Hanley, Stoke, Tunstall and Bentilee, which are highlighted in blue on the map below (Figure 4.3). To ensure that enough of the city was covered and to gain a thorough understanding of each area, both walking and driving tours were conducted.

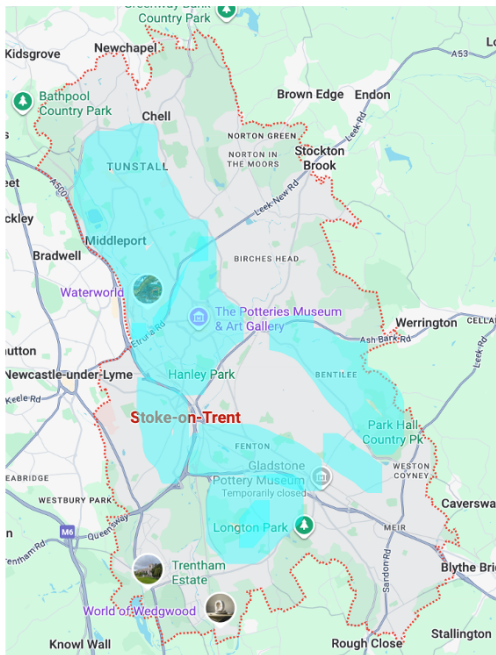


Figure 4.2. A Coded Map of Stoke-On-Trent That Demonstrates the Locations of Grand Tour Observations (Google Maps, 2025).

Once the data collection phase was underway, I began the process of reflecting on the data collected through fieldnotes and participant interviews. As the data collected began to demonstrate themes and theory was drawn upon to explain the data, further mini tour observations took place to narrow the topic of interest and observe trends closer (Spradley, 1980). This allowed for a closer inspection of trends identified within the data, including issues of job loss, the closure of many local businesses, homelessness and the corrosion of the local landscape. However, despite ensuring that observations were thorough enough to generate the rich data required for this study, their use was minimal in comparison to the data generated from participant interviews. Though ethnographic observations were used infrequently throughout the study, as seen in Brewer (2000), the data generated strengthened my understanding of the everyday lives of young people, the way this is impacted by locale and the relationship between the objective reality of Stoke-on-Trent and the participants subjective experience of the city.

Despite the obvious benefits of utilising ethnographic observations within qualitative research, the subjective nature of this method of data collection must be acknowledged. This is often a consequence of researcher characteristics and background (Kawulich, 2005), which is of particular concern for this study due to my position as a complete participant observer. A complete participant observer is characterised as an insider due to their preexisting connection and involvement with the setting in which they are observing (Gold, 1958). Watson and Till (2010, p.121) state that having such close ties with the research site meant that 'divisions between 'home' and field were never clear cut'. This therefore brings into question the validity of the data collected and ultimately the research findings. However, my positionality has been well documented throughout to alert anyone reading this to my biography and give them the information they need to make an informed decision on the bias this may present.

Watson and Till (2010) acknowledge that observations are still so widely utilised due to their ability to help understand how people experience the world and the social phenomenon that occurs through the spaces they live in and the people they surround themselves with. Although the writings of Watson and Till (2010) are specifically concerned with geographical ethnographic investigations, rather than criminological ethnographies such as this one, the premise is still applicable. Like geographical ethnographies, a seminal part of this study is the examination of the relationship between people and place (Watson and Till, 2010). As seen throughout the first two chapters of this thesis, the unique shared cultures and economic structures present in the City of Stoke-on-Trent implicitly impacted the way in which young people within the city experienced events like the Covid-19 pandemic and transition through adulthood. It was therefore important that, despite the limitations associated with the use of observations in research, that ethnographic fieldwork took place to observe, document and

further understand the links between the socioeconomic structures present within the city and the harms experienced by young people.

### **Data Analysis:**

The nature of qualitative research, particularly those that include ethnographic observations, requires the researcher to repeat research steps numerous times, as documented earlier in this chapter. This enabled me to develop a further understanding of the observed, collect additional data that provides further richness, perform a more cultivated analysis of the findings, and enhance reflexivity (Treadwell, 2020). Therefore, the data analysis for this research began during the data collection phase of the study and continued throughout the write up of the findings and results of the research. Although ethnography may seem an easy option as the use of observations as data seems simplistic, the iterative and in-depth nature ensured that conducting this ethnographically informed qualitative study did not fall short of being a messy and complex process (Maher, 1997). As such, no phase of this ethnographically informed research has been straightforward, including the data analysis stage.

The first step taken to begin analysing the data was interview transcription. To speed up the time it took to transcribe the 25 interviews, some of which lasted over 60 minutes, a Teams audio transcription service was utilised. However, as identified by Bokhove and Downey (2018), it soon became apparent that the automatically generated transcripts were rarely completely accurate. Although they were useful as a first draft of the transcript (Bokhove and Downey, 2018), manual corrections had to be made to ensure they were correct and had the required level of detail needed for this qualitative research. This allowed the researcher to ensure that full verbatim transcription was achieved, as initially intended. Transcribing full verbatim means that all noises, errors, replications and all linguistic mistakes made by the research participant during the interview are left in the transcript (Bucholtz, 2000). Using this

transcription method allows the researcher to ensure that they truly capture what is that the participant is trying to say or portray (McMullin, 2021). Although transcribing the data took longer than initially anticipated, the process helped the researcher become reacquainted and more familiar with the data pertained within the interviews whilst also allowing for initial themes to be identified within the data (Bryman, 2016).

Once an interview was transcribed it then went through a process of thematic analysis. This process of analysis was informed by the six phases of thematic analysis created by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach states that the following steps are to be taken when conducting a thematic analysis: getting to know the data that has been collected, create preliminary codes, examine the data for reoccurring themes, review and establish the themes, define the themes and write-up the findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This is where the analysis phase became a messy and complex process for this study. To start with, the analysis began by highlighting the codes in different colours on the original digital transcript. The highlighted codes were then transferred into separate tables which identified individual codes and themes. The transcripts and tables were examined again and from this, more narrow themes were created and defined. As also experienced by Telford (2022), who utilised the same approach to data analysis, the process was long and drawn-out. It was not a case of completing a step in the process and moving on to the next as transcripts and initial codes were under constant review. However, repeating the phases of thematic analysis several times allowed for a thorough examination and further increased my familiarity with the data collected (Telford, 2022).

To analyse the data collected, a hybrid thematic analysis was conducted (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This approach utilises both inductive and deductive reasoning, whereby the criminologically informed social harm framework and the data collected from participants

were used to identify common themes (see Swain, 2018). Ethnographic studies often begin with a broader topic of interest, rather than a specific hypothesis that requires testing (O'Reilly, 2009), which is characteristic of an inductive approach to research. This was the case for this study as the main aim was to develop an understanding of the varied lived experience of the participants. As an opposing approach to deductive reasoning, an inductive approach starts with minimal predetermined theory, structure or framework and a theoretical framework is then developed to explain what has been observed (O' Reilly, 2009). Treadwell (2020, p.24) justifies the use of inductive reasoning in ethnographic research as it accounts for the '*complexity, nuance and contradictions*' of the setting or group being observed. Therefore, this approach allows for the attainment of rich data, which is paramount in qualitative ethnographic studies such as this one.

However, it must be understood that social research is very rarely based purely on inductive reasoning. As highlighted in Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), preconceived knowledge of theory, stereotypes, and the researchers own characteristics all contribute to the data generated and ultimately presented within the study. As a result of my own preexisting understanding of social harm and ultra-realist approaches, this study could never truly be based on inductive reasoning alone, however, the extent to which these theories were applied, and the elements of these expansive frameworks that were ultimately drawn upon to understand the lives of the participants was determined by the data collected. As seen in the reflections made throughout this chapter, a combination of my personal biography, learning from the data collected and an increased understanding of the ultra-realist theoretical framework ultimately shaped my understanding of the phenomenon being studied and guided the overall direction of this research (see Swain, 2018), therefore this study truly utilised both inductive and deductive reasoning.

The growth and learning achieved during this process and documented throughout this chapter, however, did not end here, therefore my final reflections can be found below.

### **Final Reflections, Where Next:**

Given the nature of the reflections seen throughout this chapter and how they have demonstrated not only my personal connection to this research, but also how my growth and maturation as an academic, and dare I say it, as a young person navigating the transition into adulthood, has influenced its development, it is fitting to end on a final reflection that identifies what may be next for me and my research.

‘It’s good to be in something from the ground floor. I came too late for that, I know. But lately, I’m getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over’ (Tony Soprano).

Towards the end of my PhD, I turned thirty-years-old. In the weeks and days leading up to my 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, I did not feel the same anxieties that my friends warned me about based on their own experience of facing the milestone birthday (there is a benefit to being one of the youngest in my peer group as words of wisdom often come my way). Perhaps it was the no expense spared birthday trip to Scotland or the fact that I did not feel like I was ‘getting old’ in the same way my friends did that offset some of the anxieties and contributed to the lack of fear in the build-up. In fact, I was excited, excited at the prospect that turning 30-years old may miraculously make me a whole new person with a more stable, predictable and brighter future and that all the instability and insecurity I had previously experienced could be something that I left in my 20s. With the new, more ‘adult’ me and the end of my PhD in sight, I could finally see the light at the end of the tunnel. My fiancé (of 10 years at this point) and I even began to discuss the prospect of buying our first home, getting married and building our family.

However, not one week after turning thirty the veil fell, and crises hit. Little did I know that after five years of working towards my PhD, at a time when I was finally heading towards the finish line, that higher education would be in such a state of crises. I returned home from my birthday trip to find out that my dream of attaining a full-time, permanent position at my home-town university may not be as close in reach as I once dared to think. This news was made even harder with job prospects in higher education more generally becoming few and far in between and the credential demands for early career researchers becoming higher (you must have a completed PhD, two publications, experience of teaching, a teaching qualification is desirable and the list seemingly gets longer as time goes on). This led to me entering into crisis mode. After spending five years working towards my PhD, going through numerous revisions of the structure and focus of the thesis, passing several reviews, obtaining ethical approval, spending countless nights writing and collecting the data needed, I wanted to give it all up- with only six months left to go before my final registration. A feeling that I am sure many PhD students can relate to, it was not the first (nor was it the last) time I wanted to quit. However, for me, this time was different. I was not just frustrated with the progress of the thesis or concerned that I did not have the required personal or academic skills to complete a PhD (both of which have caused many a crisis, which I am sure my supervisors would attest to). I was scared, scared that I would walk away after five years with nothing to show for it. I could look past the fact that I had turned thirty with very little to show for it, no children, no marriage and still living at home with my parents. However, the prospect of graduating without a job in HE, which would afford me the stability and life progression I so desperately wanted, made me question whether 'the piece of paper' that gave me the title of 'Dr' would be enough to make the trials, tribulations and sacrifices I had endured feel worth it.

The timing of my PhD completion and how it coincided with a time of crises in higher education felt like a family curse. My brother qualified as a bricklayer in 2008, just as the global financial crash took the world by storm. Though he is doing well for himself now, he never went on to work within the trade industry. Unfortunately, unless there is a very quick and radical social, cultural and economic transformation, my younger brother is also likely to experience a similar, extended, uncertain and unstable transition into adulthood. This is because it is not a family curse, it is the experience of many, many young people. This is especially true for those living in left behind towns and cities like Stoke-on-Trent where the scars of the neoliberal Symbolic order are as much present on the people who live there as they are on the physical landscape of the city itself. That is the purpose of this thesis; to highlight the insecurity, instability and other harms felt and experienced by many young people transitioning into adulthood, just like myself.

It is this very reflection of my own instability during the final months of my PhD that gave me the final push to complete the project. First, it reminded me of how important it is to ensure the voices and experiences of my participants are heard as young people continue to experience the same chronic insecurity and instability as I do. Secondly, this experience also reminded me as to why I can continue to justify my engagement in research examining the lives of young people today. As a young person of a similar age to many of my participants and someone who was also born and raised in Stoke-on-Trent, it is undeniable that my own life and experiences are often reflected in the data collected. However, what my own personal positionality has also allowed for is an authentic, albeit empathetic, evaluation and understanding of the lives of young people from someone who is also currently in the thick of 'entering into adulthood'. Finally, my personal experience of instability upon entering my thirties acted as a stark reminder that this is only the start of the research that needs to be

done to truly recognise the impact that neoliberalism is having on the lives of young people. My participants are aged 18-29, however, it is evident that turning 30 does not automatically mean that you enter a world of stability, optimism and security.

This chapter has done what any methods chapter sets out to achieve. It has provided a detailed exploration of the methodological considerations and research tools used to carry out this project. However, it has also far exceeded this. The reflections provided throughout have documented the development of this thesis through my own personal experiences and growth as an academic. As I became a confident and competent academic, this thesis became the project that is presented here now. This progress means that this thesis has been able to deliver a nuanced insight into the experiential realities of young people transitioning into adulthood in today's neoliberally informed world. More specifically, it delivers an insight into the lives of young people in forgotten cities like Stoke-on-Trent as they navigate their lives in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic and beyond. As such, this thesis will now progress onto the empirical chapters where the experiential realities of young people from Stoke-on-Trent will be presented and analysed using the harm-based ultra-realist theoretical framework explored in the last chapter.

## **Chapter 5: The Experiential Realities of Young People in Stoke-on-Trent**

The following three chapters have been developed to serve only one primary purpose, to document and examine the experiential realities of young people in Stoke-on-Trent today. This will be achieved through presenting the empirical data collected via participant interviews and ethnographic field notes in a way that presents the lives and voices of young people in Stoke-on-Trent as they navigate the transition into adulthood. The data presented is a product of the time it was collected in that much of it focuses on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. What is now known, however, is that despite first being believed to be an opportunity for expansive societal change (see Briggs *et al.*, 2020), the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic and the UK government response doubled down on the depth of neoliberal social, political and economic structures already present. Thus, through examining the impact of the pandemic, this thesis is able to draw on the wider experiences of youth as it is governed under neoliberalism today.

In taking the knowledge and understanding of youth and the harm-based ultra-realist framework established in the literature reviews, the following three chapters will examine the vast array of harms faced by young people in Stoke-on-Trent. This includes indirect harms that arise out of neoliberally informed economic structures that trickle down to institutions and individuals to the direct internalisation, projection and physical manifestation of harmful neoliberal ideologies at an individual level. All of which can have a profound impact on young people and those around them. With that being said, harms at all levels will be seen across all three of the chapters in a way that prioritises and works around the voices of the young people of Stoke-on-Trent, rather than an entirely systematic process that could potentially dilute their stories and lose the value of what they have to say about their lives as they transition into adulthood.

On a fundamental level, the first of the three data chapters provides an insight into the impact of locale on the experiential realities of young people in Stoke-on-Trent, for good and for bad. It explores the culture and systemic structures of the city to contextualise both the atmosphere and physical space in which the participants grew up and the way the city has shaped their experiences as they transition into adulthood. The second data chapter focuses primarily on the harms that manifest in the workplace, whilst drawing on other related areas such as education. It documents the harmful encounters young people have with other individuals around them and showcases how neoliberally informed institutional practices negatively impact on their everyday lived experiences as well as their long-term social and economic stability and security. The final data chapter draws upon the impact of not only the pandemic, but also wider tenants of neoliberal social and economic policy and imperatives, on the mental and physical health of young people in Stoke-on-Trent. In the absence of stability and protection for their health, this chapter also examines concepts of wellbeing, beauty and bodily capital and how, often to further detriment, they are seen by young people as a way of mitigating the harms they face at the hands of neoliberal economic and cultural logic.

Together, the data chapters provide a considered insight into some of the most important corners of the lives of young people in Stoke-on-Trent. This approach is imperative in order to truly demonstrate the extent to which neoliberalism has come to govern the lives of young people and expose them to harmful ideologies and socioeconomic structures that have led to their transitions into adulthood becoming more challenging, drawn out, unstable, insecure, anxiety fuelled and an undeniably harmful experience. As demonstrated, it is documenting the experiences of the young people in Stoke-on-Trent that is the most important feature of

this thesis, therefore, the remainder of this micro chapter will provide an in-depth biographical overview of six participants from this study.

Mike:

As a sports coach, Mike is an ambitious character. He held several jobs over the pandemic, including working for Domino's Pizza. He felt like working in the fast-food industry did not align with his ambitions or what he envisaged for his life. Before the pandemic arrived, he worked as a community sports coach, which is an industry that often operates on a gig economy, whereby most people in the industry are on zero-hour, flexible contracts. To place himself in a better position to receive a more permanent, stable contract related to sports coaching, Mike also went to university to do a master's degree as a mature student. Though Mike had taken a break in coaching to get started with his education, lockdowns meant that the opportunity to get back into it during the course of the pandemic was taken away, which impacted on his career progression.

Marie:

Marie has moved in and around Stoke-on-Trent most of her life, seeing and living within many areas of the city. This includes more affluent areas on the outskirts as well as the less prosperous towns towards the centre of the city. Yet, her reflections show that it is in the latter that she most feels like she belongs. This is mostly due to her job in hairdressing which requires her to be closer to the city centre, but also because it is where she considers home. As a hairdresser whose job it is to converse and interact daily with community members, she had many insights into the impact of the pandemic on her and her clients. Her job also means that she is a very sociable person, which meant that she was predisposed to the impact of lockdowns and the isolation that they brought with them. At the time of interview Marie had not one, but three jobs as she was also self-employed and worked in a local chip shop. This

came as despite being in her late twenties, was still trying to generate enough income for a mortgage deposit, to get married and begin a family of her own, all whilst paying to rent a property.

Eddie:

Eddie was amongst the youngest participants in the study as he had just turned 20-years-old at the time of interview. He still lives at home, which is not out of the ordinary at that age. He enjoys playing sport and going to watch Stoke City Football Club on the weekends. Yet, outside of that, he prefers to stay at home and spend time with his family as he does not drink or engage with the night-time economy. Eddie was still at college studying sport when Covid-19 hit the UK and as such, his education was placed online and interaction with his peers was further limited outside of online mediums. He also has a number of preexisting health concerns like asthma and allergies that made lockdowns and the pandemic even more of a turbulent and anxious time for him.

Stacey:

As one of the oldest participants at the age of 29, Stacey is a step-mum of one and the mum of two young children, one of which was only a baby at the start of the pandemic. She is very close to her family as she spends much of her free time with them and they are her primary support network for childcare. This was impacted by the pandemic as she lost much of the physical support she received and her relationship with her partner suffered as a result of the pressure they were under. At the time, Stacey also worked in retail, however, she had to step down from her supervisory role because of the pandemic and childcare related issues under the lockdown conditions. This resulted in her eventually leaving the job entirely as after she stepped down, the atmosphere became hostile.

Simon:

Simon, 27, works as a supervisor in retail. He is largely content with his job as it offers him some stability, a regular pay check and the ability to keep his work from entering his home life. He has an extensive education, including two master's degrees, both related to teaching. The reason he stayed out of teaching was threefold. The high intensity and stress he faced during his PGCE demonstrated that he could expect a life of bringing work home and having very little time for his family if that is the path he chose. The pandemic also ended his placement early, so he never got the full opportunity to experience teaching. Finally, the job market for teaching opportunities when he graduated was limited, so he felt forced into focusing his energies elsewhere to begin earning money.

Emma:

Emma moved to Stoke-on-Trent as a teenager almost ten years ago and as such, has spent almost all of her 'adult' years in the city. However, coming from the south of England where she spent the first 18-years of her life, she has a unique understanding of Stoke-on-Trent, what it has to offer and what it does not. She talks fondly of how friendly and welcoming she finds those from the City. She also enjoys the anonymity of living in a bigger city where not everyone knows who you are and how this allows her to live her life more freely from the judgement of others. Emma, however, has also encountered the issues and barriers that many people in the city face, including issues of crime in her local area, issues accessing adequate health care and an inability to find enough stability and security to move out from living with her grandparents.

## **Chapter 6: Stoke-on-Trent: The Impact of Locale on the Experiential Realities of Young People**

Consideration of local infrastructures, cultural nuances and ways of life that are informed by local traditions are imperative in understanding the overall experiential realities of young people (see Nayak, 2003; Campbell, 1993). One of the basic assumptions of this thesis is that there is a very real entity out there that impacts and informs our experiential realities, one that can be explored and examined. As discussed throughout, it is the neoliberal Symbolic Order that is the dominant driving force informing the lives of many people in western societies (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Winlow and Hall, 2013; Johnston 2008; Žižek 2000). As will be emphasised and evidenced in all three data chapters, young people in Stoke-on-Trent are not exempt from the governance of the dominant Symbolic Order and the harms that this presents. However, the extent to which they recognise that the neoliberal Symbolic Order governs their lives is questionable as the experiences of young people in Stoke-on-Trent are informed and shaped by local structures, cultures and philosophies. This chapter will therefore examine the culture and values present within the City of Stoke-on-Trent and the impact it has on the lived realities of young people. More specifically, it will provide a critical account of how, according to participant accounts, local cultures, philosophies and social structures appear to have a positive impact on young people, ultimately offsetting some of the feelings of ontological insecurity caused by the pandemic and wider neoliberally informed socioeconomic structures whilst simultaneously doing the opposite.

### Why Locale?

As seen throughout previous chapters, Stoke-on-Trent is one of the many cities that have been left behind and unable to fully rebuild in the wake of deindustrialisation. As Mah (2012)

terms it, Stoke is arguably in an ongoing state of 'industrial ruination', whereby once industrial, working-class locales are experiencing a continual state of cultural and physical decline. The 'forgotten' status of towns and cities is a focal point in much ultra-realist research due to the high levels of harm caused by such degradation (see Telford, 2022). Moreover, there is an extensive body of academic literature on post-industrialism within both ultra-realism as well as academia more broadly, all of which demonstrate the importance of considering the post-industrial world in which we have now come to live (see: Ellis, 2015; Winlow and Hall, 2006; Kumar, 2005; Bauman, 2000; Baudrillard, 1981; Lyotard; 1979; and Touraine, 1971). Much of this research is anchored by the foundational work of Daniel Bell, whose book *'The Coming of Post-Industrial Society'* (1973), is widely considered the foundational, in-depth and seminal analysis of post-industrial society. This work and much of what has followed, identifies a fundamental shift in economic and political structures, moving from industry to a service economy and the impact this has had and the physical landscape of once industrial towns and those who live there. For some areas, like Stoke-on-Trent and similar locales, post-industrialism has brought with it the rapid collapse of industry, long-term economic and physical decline, widespread unemployment and a culture of harm and violence (see Ellis, 2015). All of which shape the experiential realities of those living and growing up in such locales.

However, much research in this area (see: Ellis, 2015; Harding, 2015; Fraser, 2015; Winlow and Hall, 2006; Nayak, 2006; Yates, 2006; McCauley, 2002), specifically focus on the impacts of youth crime, though missing in these narratives is the impact of such transformation on mainstream youth experiences (see Lloyd, 2018a; 2018b). Much of the body of research examining the continued felt effects of post-industrialism also neglects to examine the experiences of women (Emery, 2019). Therefore, this chapter, aims to continue expanding on

the scope of the harm examined in the post-industrial world, while shedding a more holistic insight on the lives of young people.

This focus on place and its impact is particularly important for research on Stoke-on-Trent as the strength of its industrial past and the way the city and its residents continue to strongly resonate with this heritage have a lasting effect. Mah (2012, p.12) attributes this to the presence of a 'living memory', which refers to:

people's present-day memories of a shared past, as opposed to official memory or collective memory. Living memory has diverse expressions across generations and social class, manifested through local experiences and practices in communities that are steeped in legacies of industrial ruination. Sites and processes of industrial ruination are deeply connected with the past and with the memory contained within them, as they are physical reminders of industrial production and decline, and of the lives connected to them.

Local identity and culture are extremely important to the people of Stoke-on-Trent. Almost all participants discussed their industrial heritage, what it means to be a 'Stokie' and how it factors into their everyday lives. As such, it quickly became evident during the data collection phase, that though place has always been an important factor in this research, recognition of the identity and culture associated with the city is imperative. However (as will be revealed in more depth later in this chapter) there appears to be a disconnect between Stoke-on-Trent as an objective place and the participants' subjective understanding of it. If Stoke-on-Trent once had a strong and prosperous pottery industry that served the local economy well, this is no longer the case. Stoke-on-Trent has since failed to recover or replace this industry in the wake of the new service economy, arguably in-part a result of the city's inability to let go of its industrial past (Jayne, 2004; Imrie, 1991). Making it even more important to consider

Stoke-on-Trent in its post-industrial state and the impact this has on the transition into adulthood.

What is the Harm?

This chapter examines the unique identity and culture that is tied to the City of Stoke-on-Trent and how it shapes individual subjectivities and the lived realities of young people in the city. The advancement of neoliberalism has had an immeasurable impact on culture and identity since the 1980's, which is well recognised within ultra-realism and other harm-based frameworks (See Winlow and Hall, 2022; Winlow and Hall, 2013; Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2013). The advancement of neoliberalism and its core philosophies of privatisation, marketisation, capitalism, individualism, and social mobility have vastly altered the socio-political and physical landscape of many deindustrialised towns and cities and have inarguably eroded traditional forms of working-class culture (Telford, 2022; Nayak, 2006). Such ideals allow for harm to manifest at a micro level as individuals embody these neoliberal values, informing the way they think and act (Hall and Winlow, 2015). However, this does not necessarily mean that the city of Stoke-on-Trent and its residents have stopped identifying with and embodying traditional, working-class values and attitudes as 'Stokies' have notoriously clung onto their industrial heritage (Jayne, 2004). As noted by Kotzé and Lloyd (2022), it is not indefinite that individual subjectivity will be informed by the dominant Symbolic Order, its impact can vary in degree depending on other factors like upbringing and locale. This presents a unique set of circumstances that have the potential to provide some level of perceived protection for young people against the wider harms of neoliberalism that manifest at both individual and systemic levels.

However, the unique circumstances present within the city do not entirely avert young people from soliciting the neoliberal Symbolic Order and embracing the values it represents. They also do not prevent young people from being exposed to systemic harms resulting from the everyday operation of both local and national neoliberally informed economic structures. On the contrary, the culture present within Stoke-on-Trent and the allegiance it has to its industrial past arguably further exposes young people to systemic harm it first appears to offset. This is often a result of (or at the very least, accelerated by) the aforementioned failure of Stoke-on-Trent to create a thriving service economy, to let go of its industrial past and the continued effects of post-industrialism that these circumstances have created.

It is the complex interconnection between these overarching socioeconomic structures and local nuances that inform the unique experiential realities of young people in Stoke-on-Trent, which warrant further examination.

### **What Does it Actually Mean to be a 'Stokie'?:**

The first question all participants were asked at the start of their interview was 'tell me a bit about yourself, who are you?'. It quickly became apparent that being a resident of Stoke-on-Trent was a fundamental part of the identity of many young people in the city. Heidi was one of many participants that conveyed this as in her very first response she remarked that *'I was born in Stoke hospital and have lived in the city all my life, aha, born and bred Stokie'*. This was not said in an ironic way, the tone in Heidi's voice was gleeful yet stern, suggesting that her status as a 'Stokie' was something that she was proud of and fully embraced. This embodiment of Stoke-on-Trent includes a core set of cultural philosophies and ideologies that play a part in shaping the subjectivities of young people and influence how they experience

the world around them, much like the neoliberal Symbolic Order discussed in earlier chapters (Winlow and Hall, 2015; Johnston 2008; Žižek 2000):

So, what is it to be a Stokie? So, it feels like to be a part of a community. It's a place for hard-working, working-class people. It is a working-class city for working-class people. It's hard to describe it, it's a feeling more than a thing. We are told from a young age that we are 'Stokies', that's who we are. You feel like you are just a part of the city. It shapes and defines you, I guess. [...] The history is something to be proud of, that's fed into us from a young age. The city does us proud, so we serve it well. There is something to be proud of here. The potteries, for a small city compared to others we are known across the UK and globally. We have celebs like Eddie Hall and Robbie Williams. We were in a bid for the European city of culture. We have two big football teams. That is Stoke and I guess, we are Stoke (Simon).

It could be suggested that, though the city's strong allegiance to its industrial, working-class heritage (Imrie, 1991; Edensor, 2001; Jayne, 2000) contributed to its failure to rebuild after the shift from industrialism to the service economy, it simultaneously allowed for some traditional working-class values to prevail despite neoliberalism's eradication and replacement of these values elsewhere in the UK (see Telford, 2022). It is evident from Simon's sentiments that the culture embraced within Stoke-on-Trent is more akin to traditional working-class values of hard work, community, collectivism and first and foremost, pride for local, working-class ways of life. This cultural identity is something that has been passed down through the older generations in the city:

Urm, going me nans, loved like going to see my grandparents and that [...] Urm, just like speaking to them cus like you hear like so much history and learn so much from them just by talking to them (Paul).

It is these inherited, traditional working-class values that the young people are talking about when they say they embody the city:

I very much see myself as epitomising Stoke-on-Trent really. Well, I mean it's in my accent more than anything like compared to a lot of other people. But yeah erm, just being from Bucknall and Bentilee I think it's that's quite ingrained in me (Paul).

The continued presence of these values and philosophies within the city and its residents influences the way in which young people view and understand their surroundings. Stoke-on-Trent as it stands today is not known for its prosperity or its attractive local economy, rather its chronic association with social and economic deprivation. This is synonymous with areas in which the effects of post-industrialism still linger and are visible in the decaying physical and economic landscape (Lloyd, 2022; Ellis, 2015). Bentilee, the area mentioned above by Paul, was once Europe's biggest council estate and was initially built in the 1960s to accommodate local miners and their families (Mahoney, 2015). However, this is an area that is now notorious for being a less than desirable place to live as it exhibits high levels of hardship, dilapidation, crime, and anti-social behaviour:

*Walking through Bentilee on a cold Friday evening was something I was used to as I had spent many a night there delivering sessions as a youth worker. As I made my observations of the area, one thing became glaringly obvious, nothing seemed to have changed since then, even though it was almost 5 years later. The ear-splitting sound of young lads driving up and down the long roads on motorcross bikes, often without protective gear, could be heard from almost every street, large groups of teenagers were gathered outside of the community hub and alcohol bottles and drug paraphernalia could be seen scattered across the parks and other green spaces.*

*Being in the area again reminded me of a rhyme that I have previously heard local children sing:*

*'Bentilee, Bentilee, where the kids come home from school and there's nowt in for tea, its Bentilee'*

*This was a stark reminder of the level of deprivation children and young people in the area experience as they grow up.*

Given the trajectory of Bentilee since its glory days as a home for miners, Mahoney (2015, p.35) even goes as far as to say that *'Bentilee epitomises the perceived decline of working-class communities in Stoke-on-Trent'*. This, however, is not how young people living in Bentilee view or experience the area:

Urm because even though like I say, I think a lot of people think that Bucknall and Bentilee is just a shit hole sort of thing. I don't really think of it that way. I feel it's just home. Yeah, it's very yeah, it's very much ingrained that sort of working-class Stoke-on-Trent and being proud of where you're from (Paul).

While Paul might acknowledge that the place is ‘a shit hole’, the strong attachment to traditional working-class values and unwavering pride in their environment seem to suggest that young people in Stoke-on-Trent are able to look past the presence of systemic harm within their city and shelter themselves from both embodying and falling further victim to harmful neoliberal logic and philosophies. This, at first glance, makes it appear as though the values and culture present within Stoke-on-Trent are more efficient in helping young people to navigate their lives than the dominant neoliberal Symbolic Order as it informs perhaps a less harmful way of life.

Moreover, this allegiance to the past could also suggest the presence of a form of nostalgia that is engrained in self-preservation. Winlow (2025) argues that nostalgia acts as a refuge from the multitude of harms faced by those in left-behind and declining cities. This comes as many from industrial areas have lost their stability, security and traditional working-class roots and ways of life, therefore resorting to nostalgia as a way of clinging on to a past that served them better than the present whilst placing meaning on their lived realities. Winlow (2025) further elaborates that such nostalgia is an understandable response in a time where the current socioeconomic structures do not work for many and the future seems bleaker than ever, with any hope of improvement seemingly withering away.

The way in which the embodiment of traditional working-class values and the embracing of nostalgia impacts the experiential realities of young people in Stoke-on-Trent will be explored throughout the remainder of this chapter.

## The 'Stoke-on-Trent' Way of Life, The Protector from Neoliberalism:

*As I walked the streets of Stoke-on-Trent, one town at a time, the similarities between each area became more obvious. Though I know the city well, I often had to remind myself of which town or small suburb I was in as the disparities were often minor and the boundaries unclear. There were visible signs of poverty, deprivation and decomposition of the physical surroundings in each area. Further to this, most residential properties are small terrace houses that look rather alike and similar cars can be seen in rows parked outside. For the most part, there was not a big house or fancy car in sight.*

These observations led to questions as to whether the blanket conditions of adversity present within Stoke-on-Trent had some more favourable, albeit less visible, attributes that make transitioning into adulthood a less harmful experience for those living within the city:

If you look around you, no one in the city has anything. So, erm, it's not like you need to have stuff to prove anything to anyone. Me, my family, my friends, none of us have much. I am happy with that. Like if you are happy with that, you do not feel the need to go out and achieve more, even if you think you can. Though I guess that might stop you when you can do more (Simon).

The culture in Stoke-on-Trent and the almost universal standard of living seemingly makes it more acceptable, or at least more accepted, to live a less asset rich life. Thus, offsetting some of the harm experienced by young people in areas like Stoke-on-Trent where social and economic deprivation characterise the city (see Director of Public Health, 2013) and opportunities that could allow such life styles are few and far in-between, as will be discussed in the next data chapter.

It is a thread within Hall and Winlow's (2013) work to link upward social mobility with wellbeing in that there is an assumption that everyone wishes to improve their economic prospects and positioning as this is presumed to improve the overall quality of life. However, this appears not to be the case for all young people in Stoke-on-Trent as a 'simpler' way of life and the pressure relieving benefits it appears to provide are commonly sort after:

Urm, and just the little things really. And the little things in life just being with your family and my friends and my ex like. I never really wanted much out of life. I've always [been] happy with little things sort of thing (Paul).

It is evident that upward social mobility is not necessarily the aim for all. Nonetheless, there is little to no literature problematising this concept as there is a widespread assumption that ambition to move up the ladder of social and economic success is universal. On the contrary, many young people are happy living within the confines of the economic circumstances they are accustomed to so long as it provides some financial stability and some form of a social life. Whether ontological stability is still available to working-class young people in Stoke-on-Trent, however, remains to be seen.

This, nonetheless, does not mean that young people in Stoke-on-Trent are completely immune to the felt effects of wider societal pressures to succeed:

I come from down South and my sisters still live there. My sister always wanted to be in the RAF. When she quit college, she was close to getting in, but her eyesight would never allow it. She got a job in an American style diner, working 50 hours a week. Our parents told her it was not a real job. There is a snobbery in it, but it's not intentional. My youngest sister wants to work in beauty, that is recognised as being a proper career that can allow you to progress because of the money. But it is not always about finances. My other sister is an intern on less money than the sister working in the diner, but she has a job worthy of telling their friends. It is a case [of the] type of work rather than earnings as well. That does not really happen in Stoke. I have been here for 13 years, and I am not saying it does not happen but have not felt it. I still feel some of the pressures to be successful, but more because of my upbringing and those pressures from the outside. I am always aware that there is something else you can achieve. I do not feel successful in my career, and I do not think [I'll] ever feel that. You hyper focus on what you have not achieved as well, [...] I cannot drive at 30, I do not own [a] home. But there is always something else you can do. But I think I am ok with that (Emma).

It is clear here that the very existence of notions of ambition, success and progression, which are a product of and reinforced by neoliberal logic, create a pressure on young people to conform to such values, even if they do not fully embody what they represent. As discussed previously, ideas of social mobility and meritocracy often reproduce the disparity they claim to offset (see Imbroscio, 2016; Castilla and Benard, 2010) as the opportunities to do just that are not readily available to many. It is therefore appropriate to suggest that upward social

mobility is not the route to social emancipation, but the ability to disavow might just be. Young people in Stoke-on-Trent are arguably closer, though evidently not completely able, to disavow such ideologies as the local culture in the city, which is more akin to past working-class values of community and commonality, allows for them to look beyond wider societal pressures and view their circumstances as relative to those around them.

It is apparent that notions of success and how it is demonstrated and experienced by many young people in Stoke-on-Trent are a far cry from how they are often characterised. In their account, Hall, Winlow and Ancrum (2013, p.191) even go as far as to argue that, in a state of attention-seeking narcissism created by the neoliberal marketing industry, many dream of:

Moving up the mainstream ladder with extreme rapidity, surprising everyone around them, winners and losers alike, and shoving their success in everyone's face with a sudden and extreme bout of conspicuous consumption.

There is no denying that working-class young people in Stoke-on-Trent still demonstrate a tendency to engage in consumerism (see Hayward, 2024). Perhaps out of fear of missing out or a want for the material goods they see others in possession of (see Lloyd, 2018a), young people in Stoke-on-Trent still arguably spend in excess of their needs:

I brought anything to keep me going really. I bought a lot of colouring books. Make-up, a lot of make-up, to the point where I had a suitcase full of it, clothing, trainers, I had a new phone, all sorts really. I brought a car as well [...]. I still can't drive today (Lily).

It is undeniable that this tendency to overconsume is a contributory factor for many harms experienced by young people as it contributes to the expansion of the transition into adulthood (see Hayward, 2024; Barber, 2008).

Nevertheless, the characterisations of success and consumption made by Hall, Winlow and Ancrum (2013) are often based on the male experience of consumer culture and how conspicuous consumption is used as a tool to demonstrate status, accomplishment or

association with certain values. This leads to questions as to whether such demonstration of success is universal as, 'shoving' their success in the face of others, appears to be less so engrained in the subjectivities of young people in Stoke-on-Trent:

I do not really put stuff on social media. I do not really think there is any point. I do things for enjoyment. I buy stuff that is interesting to me like Pokémon cards and things that make my life and place feel more homely, like candles and stuff. I do things that I enjoy like going to the zoo and I have a season ticket for Stoke City Football club. Not to flaunt any of it on social media, but to make my life more enjoyable (Eddie).

It could therefore be suggested that local surroundings and cultures in Stoke-on-Trent not only release young people from some of the anxiety related to obtaining material success, but it also prevents them from fully embodying neoliberal philosophies and ideologies that contribute to the production of harmful subjectivities that make people feel the need to prioritise and demonstrate success in this way. As mentioned previously, rather than directly informing human subjectivity, the norms of the dominant Symbolic Order merely make it more likely for them to be embodied (Kotzé and Lloyd, 2022). However, with the presence of local nuances and variances this may be even less likely to occur. Thus, further breaking the cycle of harm within the city and improving the experiential realities of young people as the burden to prove material and progression success is, at the very least, reduced.

It is not only in relation to notions of success and progression that the network of culture, identity and ideology present within Stoke-on-Trent act as a buffer against the harms caused by neoliberally informed social and economic structures. To reiterate what Simon said in an earlier quote '*So, what is it to be a Stokie? So, it feels like to be a part of a community*'. Despite being directly challenged by the neoliberal ideology (see Pemberton, 2015), ideas of community and collectivism still have a continued presence within Stoke-on-Trent:

I had people from the local church come and post notes through the door and things like that just to check up on people and see if anyone needed help. That was nice to know that those in the area who lived alone were given a chance to access support if

they needed it. Also, there's a local community centre just up the road from where I live. They were very involved in the local area that we live in, I do remember them posting stuff through the letterbox like quizzes and games to keep people entertained and they've got a website which they were posting stuff on most days to keep people occupied and that sort of thing (Simon).

It could be suggested that these displays of community spirit were merely just symbolic gestures used as a way to perhaps overlook the real harm that was presented by the pandemic and the wider breakdown of social connections. Briggs *et al.* (2020) highlight that this was particularly prevalent during the pandemic as many would be out clapping for key workers during this time yet seemingly disregarding pressing concerns around working conditions and inadequate remuneration for those working in health care and other key worker roles during this time. However, given that traditional working-class ideologies have been able to prevail in other realms, the issue is arguably more nuanced than merely assuming all actions demonstrating a sense of community are merely symbolic and have no deeper meaning.

This can also be said about the friendships and relationships young people in the city have with others as they appear to prioritise the development of close connections with those around them:

My parents, they had a shed, well more like a summer house, at the bottom of the garden. I would spend hours and hours in there either reading or inviting friends over to socialise and listening to music together, so that was a big part of my life really, just being with people and having fun (Alex).

Though this is a priority for many, neoliberal logic that reinforces values of competition and prioritisation of one's own self means that developing meaningful, reciprocal relationships is often difficult (Winlow *et al.*, 2015). Though this may hold more truth in the workplace as will be seen in the next chapter, this may not be the case in the personal and social spheres for young people in Stoke-on-Trent:

Irish families are pretty close, and my family is from Ireland. My grandparents think that my best friend's family are odd for an English family as they are so close. They have lived in other parts of the country, and you do not see it there. I go to her house,

and I kick up on the sofa, I eat and I call her mum, mum. It works both ways. Both our whole families get together to eat, have a drink and play darts. Our grandparents, parents, siblings, nieces, nephews and cousins, all of us, we all get together and it's like one big family. [...] Despite the fact that we are polar opposites, my friendship with my best friend is so strong. We think differently and act differently, but we have a set of core values that we live by as friends. We are never jealous of each other and what each other has or achieved; we are truthful to each other but always defend each other in public. You don't get that down south, we have friends in the traditional sense, but more often than not there is something practical or transitional involved. My dad's friends are bricklayers and things like that; there's a practicality to it (Emma).

As discussed throughout, the characteristics of Stoke-on-Trent arguably allow for a release of some of the pressures to compete and prove superiority as many people find themselves in very similar socioeconomic circumstances, therefore allowing for deeper connections that are not thwarted by the presence of jealousy and competition. This is demonstrable in the way young people in the city chose to spend their time:

Well, I used to spend a lot of my time around family. I've always had a great family, they offer a lot of support to me, they look after the kids whilst I am at work and stuff. My boyfriend's brother and sister and her partner stopped over most weekends. We loved a good games night with monopoly or Cluedo. [...] Sometimes we would go places on the weekend too. Like where's it called, near Leek? Tittesworth res, that's the one. We would spend time there walking around the water, doing sport and having picnics (Stacey).

Despite the perceived lack of economic activity and lore within the city, young people who live there still find ways to spend their time and utilise not only the local green spaces as mentioned above, but also the amenities and leisure facilities on offer:

Yeah, there is stuff to do in the city. As a family we normally go out for meals, pretty much normally once a month if we could, to like Bon Pan Asia. I used to go cinema quite a lot as well, for all the marvel films and that kinda stuff. [...] Saturdays were for football, sometimes I would go away games, so most Saturdays I would be doing that (Eddie).

This ability to see what that city has to offer even prevailed after the pandemic when the UK could be described as in recessionary economic state (Etherington, Jones and Telford, 2022) and many local businesses and facilities closed their doors for good:

The sugar mill, I used to go there quite a lot. It's my favourite place in Stoke actually. Just somewhere I'd go. [...] Urm, there's an Italian actually just up the road from me. I

used to love going there but it closed down just before the pandemic. That was probably my favourite place to go (Paul).

What has been made clear throughout is that young people in Stoke-on-Trent do not place overly high expectations on themselves or the city. Their expectations are relative to what they see and experience around them. This has the potential to improve their overall lived experiences as it relieves not only some of the pressures felt by many other young people but also allows them to find enjoyment in engaging with and having access to what the city does have to offer, rather than wallowing in what they could or should have available to them.

This section, however, only presented one side of the picture. Therefore, the extent to which the local economy, wider socioeconomic infrastructures and related values and philosophies in post-industrial Stoke-on-Trent truly benefit and serve the city's residents will be explored in the remainder of this chapter.

### **A City of Six Towns- The Other Side to Stoke-on-Trent:**

*Stoke-on-Trent and its six towns. I never realised how important the six towns element was in relation to the experiential realities of young people until I began to truly take in what it meant. Stoke-on-Trent is a city. However, it has never just been that. Stoke-on-Trent is made up of six main towns and several suburbs, each one having its own individual identity, local customs and even their own distinct dialects. This began during the industrial era as each locale had its own pot bank, some of which are still in operation and the remnants of others can be seen as you walk the streets. Since then, each town operates more like a self-contained, self-sufficient, independent mini city. This comes with an element of competition. Longton has a B&M? Fenton needs one too. Festival Park has a cinema? Hanley must build one too. However, this pays a visible price on the city overall. The Hive, a relatively new food and entertainment complex in Hanley, has more empty units than occupied ones. The signs for a Nando's that used to reside there are still visible. However, there is a Nando's less than five minutes down the road. The cinema in Festival Park was starkly quiet when I visited one Friday evening, but there are three cinemas in the local area on offer for people in the city. This repetitive cycle of provision duplication and subsequent displacement is a common story and sight across Stoke-on-Trent.*

This inability of Stoke-on-Trent to build a stable, central economy or even allow for each of the towns to take ownership of a specific element has contributed to its downfall since deindustrialisation and the ascent of the service economy. This competition and subsequent over provision means that none of the towns or the city more broadly have been able to prosper (Jayne, 2004). This has wider implications on the lives and stability of young people in the city today as it increases the systemic harm they face. As will be seen in more depth in the next chapter, the service economy is already underpinned by neoliberal logic that promotes profit over people, which in turn creates much instability for young people (see Lloyd, 2018a; 2018b). This is further reinforced by local economic infrastructures in Stoke-on-Trent as any employment in retail, the food industry or any other lower-level service economy role offer even less security. Once a new restaurant opens or a new shop is built jobs become at risk as the lesser performing business, or even both, shut down, and the cycle repeats: *'Stoke is not what it used to be. It is a shit hole now. I was just saying the other day. If Primark closes in Hanley, there will be nothing left'* (Marie).

Young people in Stoke-on-Trent no longer have access to more stable, traditional working-class jobs that past generations in the city were able to benefit from:

Me Grandparents, so urm again, very working-class. Me grandad urm worked like in pot banks and all shit like that. Urm then like me dad's dad, he was urm, was a miner and stuff like that, so you know, very typical of Stoke-on-Trent (Paul).

Working within the mines or pot banks was far from harm free. As discussed earlier, working conditions were less than adequate and the industry had wider implications on the health of those living in the city (Briggs, 1993; Taylor, 1995 and Bailey, 2000). This was confirmed by the trade union movement, which saw many working-class people fight for better working conditions:

I think a lot more than people think. Like cus like none of my family went to uni or anything like what like, but very much into like the trade unionism, worker protection and conditions and stuff like that. So, like their fucking, like their knowledge on like politics and social history and that is better than fucking most academics I've seen, you know what I mean. So, [...] I just love going to see my grandparents (Paul).

However, what these roles did offer was far more stability for young people in the city and though not necessarily well paid, allowed them to buy a property and have children:

*I was having a conversation with my grandad about life and about buying a house. He has always asked me when I am going to move out and get married. This day he jokingly suggested that perhaps it might not be as easily attainable now as it was when he was in his early 20s. At that point my mum had already been born, and him and my nan had taken out a private mortgage on a house for £1500, roughly £21,000 in today's money.*

This is no longer the reality for young people in Stoke-on-Trent as wages remain low, the cost of living has increased and work in the city is characterised by uncertainty:

I think the issues will mainly be when it comes to like buying a house, anything like that. Industries, especially things like shops in the area have collapsed. Like there's not as many job prospects like what there was before. The fish and chip shop, and the hairdressers have both closed in my area. There isn't as many shops left either as everything has gone online. The house prices have gone through the roof; you can't afford to save in this generation. Even more so now the cost of living has gone up. Buying a food shop, heating your home, just living basically, is expensive. I think you'll find lot[s] of people find it that way and are in the same position. It's tough for us, but I am also scared for my son and his generation, as I think it's going to get worse (Heidi).

Given the current economic climate and working conditions within the city, many young people in Stoke-on-Trent have to resort to taking on more than one job to gain at least some social and financial security: *'Urm, I do currently have three jobs, I work in a hairdressers, I am self-employed as a mobile hairdresser and I also work in a chip shop'* (Marie). Insecurity and instability are only predicted to get worse for young people as the age of technology and AI begins to further endanger the ever-reducing job market (See Hart, Bavin and Lynes, 2025).

It would be disingenuous to suggest that the City of Stoke-on-Trent has made no attempt to rebuild in recent years to create a more prosperous set of economic circumstances that could potentially improve the experiential realities of those who live there. Urban regeneration attempts of varying degree of success can be seen across the city (see City of Stoke-on-Trent,

2024b). In some instances, regeneration efforts have only been partially successful, especially those amid completion at the start of the pandemic:

*I was walking down King Street in Fenton. At least three car washes, three used car dealerships, several second-hand shops, a closed-down pottery shop, an abandoned pub that has visible fire damage and other abandoned buildings adorn the main road. Yet one place in particular stands out, a café that sits back off the main road. The café is housed in what was once an old pottery factory, with a bottle kiln still standing tall in the backdrop. Unlike the rest of King Street, the area surrounding the Glost House Café has been well maintained. It feels like a step back into history as the area gives off a sense of 'potteries' nostalgia, and the smell of oatcakes coming from the Café only adds to this. This area is also home to several modern office spaces. There has been a visible attempt to salvage the main body of the pottery factory that once stood there as building work was once underway to turn it into flats and apartments. Nonetheless, these efforts remained unfinished as the pandemic likely stopped it in its tracks. The only evidence remaining of the rejuvenation efforts are left-over tubs of paint, building tools and debris still visible from the main road.*

Nonetheless, since the Stoke-on-Trent City council has ascribed to the national 'Levelling Up' agenda, whereby efforts are made to reduce social and economic inequalities across the country (City of Stoke-on-Trent, 2024a), there have been other success stories. Ongoing Levelling Up efforts within the city include the development of an urban living and leisure centre next to Stoke railway station which has been named the Goods Yard:

*Working at and attending the university right across from Stoke Railway station, I have seen the goods yard develop over recent years. It has undoubtably changed the visual landscape of the area for the better. The new complex is modern and fresh looking, adding a more contemporary feel. It is home to almost 200 apartments, a gym, restaurants and other amenities. As I looked over at the complex from the canal bridge just behind it, I could see the potential for more stable job roles in the area. If all apartments became occupied and if the amenities appeal to students from the college and university across the road, then there is the potential for a steady, more stable flow of people in the area. Other additions like a bar in the railway station and a clean-up and rebuilding of the road directly outside of it make the area a more promising sight, especially for those first stepping off a train and into Stoke-on-Trent for the first time.*

The beginning of a similar development can be seen in Hanley city centre called the Etruscan Square and heritage-led regeneration is taking place at various historical sites across the city, including Stoke Town Spode Works, Tunstall Library and the Bath and Crown Works in

Longton. These initiatives aim to rebuild the city in the wake of deindustrialisation and more recently the Covid-19 pandemic, expand the local economy, generate wealth, create new jobs and bring new people to the city (see City of Stoke-on-Trent Council, 2024a).

These attempts to level up however, do not always serve those already living in the city as they propose to do and can easily transgress into the boundaries of gentrification. Although there is no set definition of gentrification as it can take many forms, principally, it is a *'process that involves the reinvestment of capital after a period of disinvestment, the production of an aestheticized landscape, and lower class displacement followed by middle class replacement'* (Bryson, 2013, p.578). The Levelling Up agenda speaks of bringing new types of people to the city (City of Stoke-on-Trent Council, 2024a), which is demonstrated in the location of some of the new developments. As mentioned already, the Goods Yard and surrounding improvements are located next to the city's railway station, no doubt an attempt to appeal to commuters and entice those working in more traditionally middle-class job roles to relocate more permanently. This could eventually lead to the displacement of working-class young people in the city (Bryson, 2013), potentially inflicting further instability and insecurity onto their experiential realities as they navigate the transition into adulthood.

Not only this, gentrification within Stoke-on-Trent and similar areas have created shifts in the working arrangements of those at the bottom of the socioeconomic strata. Such changes to present-day service class roles demonstrate characteristics of refeudalization (Kotkin, 2023; Neckel, 2020). Refeudalization, or neo feudalism, refers to the process in which socioeconomic structures, power dynamics and social hierarchies that resemble pre-modern feudalism have rematerialised (see Kotkin, 2023). Though society has not returned to the past, neoliberal capitalist logic has created the circumstances for the return of these (or least

similar) social conditions through its endorsement of privatisation and insecure employment within the service sector and the inequality it reproduces. Whilst the city aims to attract the wealthy elites of society, young people living within the city remain at the bottom of the occupational food chain, working to serve those further up in the socioeconomic hierarchy and succumbing to insecure employment and poor working conditions. This became ever more prevalent during the pandemic:

A lot of people didn't know they weren't supposed to get so close, like they'd step closer to you if they couldn't hear and that was quite scary at times as they would sometimes shout at me and hurl abuse if I had to enforce the rules, but nothing too out of the ordinary and things that we couldn't really handle, it's just part of the job description in retail isn't it (Sarah).

It is clear that as a result of the refeudalization of the working sphere, retail workers and other service workers alike have developed a sense of 'status fatalism', whereby they merely accept the uncertainty of their positions and the poor conditions of their employment as they do not expect that any positive changes will occur (Neckel, 2020). The harmful social and economic arrangements surrounding employment in Stoke-on-Trent discussed throughout this section so far have a very real impact on the everyday lives of young people working within the city, which will be explored in more depth in the next chapter.

However, this also begs the question as to whether Stoke-on-Trent is still a '*working-class city for working-class people*' (Simon)? The arguments made in the first section that Stoke-on-Trent is a city that serves the working-class is dependent on what it actually means to be 'working-class'. It is evident throughout, that, in Stoke-on-Trent the local economy is no longer characterised by industrialism as the service economy prevailed under neoliberally informed socioeconomic restructuring (see Telford, 2022). It could therefore be argued that the traditional working-class within the city has now been replaced by a new service class,

which does not appear to serve young people in Stoke-on-Trent in the same way. On the contrary, it ensures that their lives are further characterised by insecurity and instability.

It is not only the instability of the local economy and employment conditions that demonstrate the harms faced by young people living in Stoke-on-Trent today. Positive motivations to harm that impact on the everyday realities of young people in the city are also demonstratable through the presence of both subjective and symbolic violence. As mentioned in earlier chapters, Stoke-on-Trent has not only become synonymous with depravation and instability, but also high levels of crime (see Violence Reduction Alliance, 2024). The pandemic emphasised the prevalence of criminality and anti-social behaviour within the city:

[...] [T]here was not as many groups of teenagers hanging around causing trouble. They used to be at the garage down the road a lot, causing trouble, there were rumours that they robbed the shop a couple of times as well. So that's a positive from the lockdowns I guess, it was nice not having that issue as like I say, the area isn't all that bad (Eddie).

As mentioned previously, young people in Stoke-on-Trent have been able to look past the harms they face. However, changing patterns in violence during the pandemic, more specifically the reduction of public forms of subjective violence (Ellis, 2022), gave young people in Stoke-on-Trent a clearer view of crime and the very real impact it has on their experiential realities outside of such extreme times:

What is different about being in the rural south than Stoke is that you can walk the streets at night there. You cannot and I would not do it in Stoke. Here, my nan even gets my grandad to wait at the door as she gets out the car as it can be a dangerous place to live (Emma).

This clearer view of and felt effects of subjective violence and crime undoubtedly impacts on young people in Stoke-on-Trent as, at the very minimum, it instils a fear of being in the streets of the place they call home. Though the presence of crime has a bearing on the experiential

realities of many young people across the UK, from Emma's account of living in different areas across the country, it is evident that the extent to which young people are exposed to this type of interpersonal violence varies depending on locale. This exposure in Stoke-on-Trent also expands beyond the point of being a victim of subjective violence as violent subjectivities can also be seen amongst some young people in the city:

You know, so when I was a lot younger, up until about the age of 17 It was very much like my life [...] revolved around football, music, fighting, erm getting up to shit, drinking, trying to pull girls (laughs). Urm, so yeah this very much typical working-class lad life I suppose in a way (Paul).

Subjective forms of violence and their causative factors are not a key part of this study and have been examined extensively elsewhere in ultra-realist research (see Ellis 2022; 2015). However, this exemplifies how crime and criminality can come to characterise youth in the city as young people. Young people in the city are not only likely to encounter the effects of crime as victims but are also not immune to embodying neoliberal values that allow for harms to be produced at an individual level. This also expands the realm of visible, physical forms of violence. When asked what she most looked forward to when lockdown measures were lifted, Lily responded that:

Just being able to go where you wanted really and not have to fuss about it and about who you are going to see and when and why. I liked just being able to go Starbucks or out shopping for my make-up stuff, not just order online. I really couldn't wait to go back to that, especially towards the end of the pandemic.

Though this is not a form of subjective violence or crime and as such, does not have the same visible and physical consequences, it is a form of symbolic violence which is just as capable of harming those who are subjected to it (Žižek, 2008). Despite the known risks it posed to the healthcare system and the physical health of workers, key workers within retail and hospitality sectors and other, more vulnerable community members, young people in Stoke-

on-Trent still wished to retain the ability to access these forms of leisure during the pandemic. This is a form of special liberty whereby people express and act upon their desires despite the consequences it has on others (Raymen, 2018). More importantly, however, this demonstrates how the dominant neoliberal Symbolic Order, more specifically in relation to philosophies of selfish individualism, still play a role in characterising the subjectivities of young people living in Stoke-on-Trent.

This section provides just a small snapshot of the harms that arise at an individual level in Stoke-on-Trent and the impact it has on the experiential realities of young people. It is the complex interplay between overarching neoliberal philosophies and economic logic in addition to local nuances, structures and values in Stoke-on-Trent that make way for the production of systemic harms produced at an individual level within the city. However, as a result of the values present in Stoke-on-Trent, the social harms that are within the city largely go unquestioned and unchallenged by those who live there.

### **Stoke-on-Trent- A Beacon of Hope and an Epicentre of Harm:**



Figure 6.1. Figure 6.1 An Image of Moorcroft Factory in Burslem, Stoke-On-Trent.

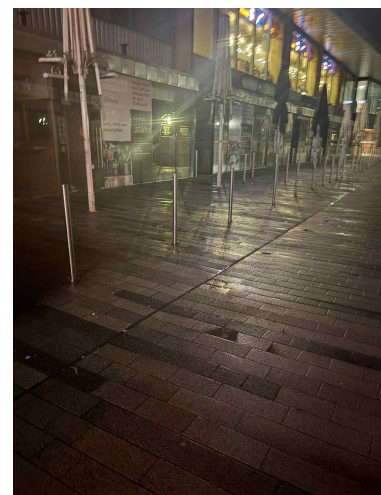


Figure 6.2 An Image of The Hive in Hanley, Stoke-On-Trent.

The images above demonstrate the paradox that is Stoke-on-Trent. On one side, there is the potteries heritage within the city, a symbolic beacon of hope and unity amongst locals (see Figure 6.1). It is this legacy and living memory of what Stoke once was (see Mah, 2012) that provides the principles, attitudes and physical attributes of the city that offer young people in Stoke-on-Trent, some shelter from the harms of neoliberalism, subsequently reducing the anxieties and pressures they face as they transition into adulthood. On the other side, the empirical realities of Stoke-on-Trent can be seen as the city centre shops remain closed, and the streets empty on a Friday evening (see Figure 6.2). This image shows the visible scars left on the city in the wake of deindustrialisation and the inability of Stoke-on-Trent to find a place and rebuild under neoliberalism. It shows the extent to which Stoke-on-Trent continues to operate in a state of industrial ruination (Emery, 2019; Mah, 2012). Both interlink and feed off each other, and both play a role in characterising and informing the experiential realities of young people in the city.

As seen throughout, many young people in Stoke-on-Trent recognise the harms they face, including the presence of anti-social behaviour and the economic decline of the city. Some have even come to question their own understanding of the city they grew up in and what it has to offer:

Erm, thinking about what I have said to you and saying it out loud, maybe these aren't my ideas about Stoke and what it means to be someone who lives here. Really thinking about it maybe it is what I have been told and passed down to me more than anything. Do I really think that there is this real sense of community? I am not sure; I do not necessarily see it every day. There were the riots in Hanley and the fact that I don't know my neighbours really (Simon).

This acknowledgement is further demonstrated by the concern young people in Stoke-on-Trent express about future generations in the city:

For younger people in general, I think those two years of not learning properly for that duration will really make a back track for the rest of their lives. Then there's people my age now, trying to [...] get a house and the markets absolutely ridiculous now. So, to try and get [a] house now is practically impossible. Deposits are so high and it's nearly impossible to try. Even if you were saving half or almost all your wages, still need to go out and live your life (Marie).

Nonetheless, the high levels of crime and harm present within Stoke-on-Trent and the negative impact of local economic structures on stability and security are evidently not enough to discourage local young people from staying within the area:

Well, I didn't really move from Stoke, just to the outskirts for a little bit, but it is still considered as Stoke. We saw 22 houses before we moved and confirmed a place. We actually confirmed that house whilst we were there because I loved it. I asked there and then if anyone else was interested and the woman said yes, so I rang the letting agency there and then and said I wanted the place. Erm, the main reason was getting the right house, we wanted something that suited us. But also, I was in a rush, my mum and dad were both moving out of Stoke and I needed to find somewhere quick. I probably wouldn't have chosen to move so far from Stoke centre, but my partner earns the big money compared to me, so it made sense to move closer to his work. But for me, the commute was worse, so when we moved again, we moved back closer to Stoke centre. It's cheaper to buy here, so more house for less money. So, it made sense (Marie).

Young people see and feel the effects of the harmful socioeconomic structures present within Stoke-on-Trent, yet, at the same time they disavow them in an almost unwavering sense of loyalty towards the city. This is arguably a process of 'fetishistic disavowal' (See Žižek, 2011; 1993) as the deep connection young people have with being a 'Stokie', the ideologies and values this represents and the way they appear to reduce the pressures and harms they face allows young people to disavow, ignore or deny the harmful realities present in Stoke-on-Trent. It would be dishonest to say that the protections offered by the values and ways of life present within Stoke-on-Trent are entirely harmful. On the contrary, it would perhaps be more adequate to suggest that many young people would embrace a set of values that reduce

the visibility and felt effects of the harms they encounter and allow them to enjoy their lives free from the anxiety and pressures of transitioning into adulthood.

However, it does impede on the decision making of young people in Stoke-on-Trent as they actively overlook the harms they face:

Erm, at this point probably not. There is just something about the city that is homely. I can't tell you what it is, it's just a feeling. Like you see. Eddie Hall, he still lives here. With his money, he could move anywhere in the world. Yet he brings his children up here. You see him shopping in the local shops, he isn't trying to get out. [...]. Despite what people think Stoke still has things to offer. There's nicer places to grow up, there are areas with less crime. You do not need to move out of the city to better yourself (Simon).

Instead of questioning both the overarching and local structures that cause them harm, young people in Stoke-on-Trent still hold out hope for a better future for themselves within the confines of the current structures and within the city (see also Hall and Winlow, 2015; Fisher, 2009). As seen throughout this chapter, the likelihood of young people successfully achieving upward social mobility and moving to the more prosperous, less harmful corners of Stoke-on-Trent and to be able to benefit from the increased ontological stability this may offer is limited. This is especially true if they intend to remain in Stoke-on-Trent and rely on the local economy to provide adequate and stable working conditions. Yet the very presence or promise of these opportunities is enough to impact on the decision of young people to stay in the city, even if they are not realistically achievable.

This 'hijacking' of decision making is present within neoliberal society more broadly and there is much debate on how this arises (see Hall and Winlow, 2025). Whether it is because the culture and values present within the city offset some of the harms and pressures faced by its young people, the way Stoke-on-Trent characterises itself as a working-class city that serves working-class young people or how it appears to offer the ability to create a better life and

future within the city, remaining in Stoke-on-Trent is seen as the most viable, least harmful option by many young people (see Fisher, 2009).

Another likely explanation for this reluctance to leave is the presence of nostalgia. As seen throughout, nostalgia is prevalent in Stoke-on-Trent as many 'Stokies' continue to identify with and reminisce about the now largely gone pottery industry heritage that once served the city and its people well. As Winlow (2025) suggests, many people now look to the past, a time that was considered more stable and secure for those from traditional working-class backgrounds, as a coping mechanism to deal with the increasingly dark prospects of the future. Where this study differs from Winlow's work is the demographic of the participants themselves. Though Winlow interviewed around 70 men and women aged 45 to 60 who lived through the transition from manufacturing to the service economy, the young people whose stories of Stoke's social, cultural and economic heritage have been documented throughout this section, were all under the age of 30. Young adults in the city glamourise and almost mourn a life that they have never physically experienced, one that they have only lived vicariously through the stories they have heard and lingering reminders of industrialism in the landscape of the city. Thus, creating a discord between the objective realities of life in post-industrial Stoke-on-Trent and the subjective understanding that young people have of the city. Such disjuncture arguably expands the grip of nostalgia even further, as to hide from their actual realities, young people in the city live vicariously in a world that never really existed for them. One of the most prevalent issues here is that through living in a state of nostalgia and embracing traditional working-class attitudes and behaviours that no longer serve them in the neoliberal world, young people are prevented from actively challenging the harms that they encounter and making a fully informed decision as to whether to leave or stay within the city that very clearly subjects them to further harm.

Stoke-on-Trent clearly has, at least to some degree, a positive impact on the experiential realities of those transitioning into adulthood in the city. Nonetheless, the city nor its residents are immune to the overarching social, political, economic and cultural shifts that have seen the transition into adulthood become a much more prolonged and unstable experience than seen in past generations (see Hayward, 2024). In fact, as discussed earlier, young people are particularly susceptible to these harms, and they actively solicit the neoliberal Symbolic Order to make sense of the world they live in and navigate this transitory period in their lives (Lloyd, 2018a). On top of this, as young people put an unwavering and unquestioning trust into the City of Stoke-on-Trent to protect them and their interests, they fall further victim to harm as the city no longer serves its self-proclaimed purpose as a working-class city for working-class people. Stoke-on-Trent, the city that many local young people have come to experience as a place that protects them against neoliberal ideologies and socioeconomic structures, is therefore also paradoxically and simultaneously responsible for reproducing and increasing these very same harms. It is the combination of overarching socioeconomic structures and local nuances and failures that shape the lived realities of young people in the city and the way they experience the transition into adulthood. As will be demonstrated in the next two chapters, for many young people in Stoke-on-Trent, these unique set of circumstances have increased the likelihood that this period in their lives is characterised by insecurity, instability, anxiety and poor mental and physical wellbeing.

## **Chapter 7: Workplace Harms: Torment, Timetables and Transitions**

This chapter provides an expansive insight into the harms faced by young people in their place of work before, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. More specifically, this chapter will examine the way neoliberal ideology and economic practices have come to shape and inform institutional practices, workplace cultures and the individual subjectivities of workers, their colleagues and the people they serve, all of which come together to create harmful working environments for young people. The first section targets the harms experienced by young people in the workplace because of the willingness of colleagues and service users to cause harm to others to 'further their own instrumental or expressive interests' (Hall, 2012, p.1). The following section examines the harms that arise as a result of neoliberally informed institutional operations and the impact they have on the everyday experiential realities of young people. The final section brings to light how the overall progression and transition of young people are impacted by these workplace practices as well the wider cultural and socioeconomic barriers they face in doing so.

### **Why Work?**

As working aged people, many of the participants within this study talked extensively about their employment during their interviews, often drawing upon their experiences in the workplace and the impact they have on wider tenants of their lives. A large proportion of the participants within this study were employed in public facing roles within the wider service economy. This includes restaurant workers, health care providers, educators, a hairdresser and several retail workers, which is reflective of the labour market within Stoke-on-Trent as between October 2022 and September 2023, 12,600 working aged people within the city

were employed within caring, leisure and other service occupations and 8400 were employed within sales and customer service occupations (Nomis, 2023). This comes as Stoke-on-Trent's labour market has seen dramatic changes since the drivers of economic growth have shifted from industry to service. For larger cities like Manchester and Birmingham, where the infrastructure allowed, this meant a move towards services in finance, business, real estate and rent (City of Stoke-on-Trent, 2024c). For Stoke-on-Trent, however, like many other forgotten towns and cities that once relied heavily on the manufacturing industry for employment and economic stability (see Telford, 2022), the city has failed to thrive in the more lucrative service industries. As a result of these labour market conditions and further issues associated with educational attainment in the city, Stoke-on-Trent has some of the highest levels of low pay and skills nationwide (see Etherington *et al.*; MacLeod and Jones, 2020; Hardship Commission, 2015). Though manufacturing jobs still employ around a sixth of workers in the city, the sectoral breakdown is very different to what it once was (Stoke-on-Trent City Council, 2024). Stoke-on-Trent City Council (2024) highlight that around a sixth of workers can be found in the retail sector and a tenth of workers are employed within transport and logistics roles, whereas one of the largest areas of employment in the city is the health and adult social care sector, which employs more than a fifth of those of employment age in Stoke-on-Trent.

Many of the roles above are notoriously characterised by instability, insecurity and other forms of harm, which have subsequently increased since the Covid-19 Pandemic (see *Tiesman et al., 2023; Marsh et al., 2022; Benavan, 2021*). In focusing on work, this chapter will also be able to shed further light on the harms faced by those working within the broader service sector whilst also being able to segway into other areas of youth life including education,

relationships and life progression, thus, providing a holistic insight into the experiential realities of participants.

### What is the Harm?

This chapter critically explores the way in which a plethora of harms manifest in the workplace and the impact they have on the experiential realities of young people in Stoke-on-Trent. This includes the way in which dominant political and socioeconomic ideologies contribute to the production of harm at an individual level. In doing so, I capture the presence of positive motivations to harm in the workplace, which present themselves through bullying and poor treatment by customers and service users (See Lloyd, 2019; 2018a). Harmful working practices at organisational level and the impact they have will also be at the forefront of this chapter. As neoliberal logic informs and is embodied by individual institutions, much like with the personification of neoliberal values and ideologies at an individual level, they too feel that they are entitled to risk harm to their employees to meet the needs of the wider company (see Lloyd, 2018a; Hall and Winlow, 2015). This places these harms almost in between systemic, negative motivations to harm and positive motivations to harm as they are a direct result of the everyday functioning of the neoliberal economy, whilst also a consequence of the embodiment and outward projection of these same harmful ideologies by companies and corporations. These harms have the potential to impact on the daily lives of young people as they experience unstable working patterns, last minute requests to work and inadequate remuneration for the work they do. They also face a lack of protection in the workplace, poor pay, variable pay and general precariousness. The final section will examine the wider impact these circumstances have on the experiential realities of young people and their overall

ontological security as the circumstances they find themselves in prevent long term progression and stability.

In examining harmful encounters in the workplace, the everyday institutional practices within the service economy and the impact these practices and wider socioeconomic structures have on the experiential realities of young people, the remainder of this chapter will be able to holistically explore:

‘The connection between individual behaviour, organisational practice and the depth structures of neoliberalism and capitalism leads to the emergence of direct and indirect social harms within the service economy which demands investigation’ (Lloyd, 2018a, p.7).

### **Customers and Colleagues, A Source of Harm:**

Sexual and racial abuse, threats of physical violence and even acts of subjective violence are of great concern and prevalence within retail (British Retail Consortium, 2025) and the service economy more broadly. Though not downplaying the impact of such acts, it is not extreme, subjective forms of physical violence however, that most commonly impact the everyday lives of young workers:

We had to cancel a load of (hairdressing) appointments too as lockdowns kept coming. Most of my customers, they were kind and understanding. Thinking about it though, one asked me to break the rules and go to their house. I barely knew this woman, why would I break the rules for her? She went off on one and got a bit nasty when I refused, but I wasn't going to do that (Marie).

Harmful encounters and interactions like these are commonplace within the service industry. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many customers and service users risked harm to workers through none-physical or threatening means like the breaking of lockdown rules and entirely legal and often culturally accepted harmful and disparaging verbal altercations. As will be

discussed later in this section, these are often a result of broader cultural shifts encouraging individuals to express forms of special liberty that allow them to prioritise their needs over the wellbeing of others (Hall, 2012).

It must be pointed out that this type of behaviour towards workers in the service economy is not a new phenomenon that began and ended with the Covid-19 Pandemic. This is evident from recent research as, in 2025, the reporting of such incidents in the retail sector alone was 340% higher than in 2020 (British Retail Consortium, 2025). However, the implementation of lockdown measures meant that the service economy was (alongside the home) one of the only places in which violence and harm of any kind could occur, thus increasing incidents in these spheres (see Bushell and Braithwaite, 2024). The pandemic also presented new reasons and opportunities for customers and service users to become dissatisfied and respond in such harmful ways:

Well, working in health care, I was still working, I was working more actually. I helped out with almost like a pop-up health care centre. We were still seeing people face-to-face, but behind huge screens and wearing PPE to stop any sort of, erm, physical contact. It wasn't nice at times, being scared of catching covid, but also not being able to help people in the same way we used to. The patients did not always like it either, some would shout at us, even threaten us about the wait times or because some appointments were on the phone, even the fact that we had to put these measures in place, to keep us all safe, caused them to tell us off sometimes (Heidi).

It was not just the ceasing or changing mode of services that posed an issue for service workers, as those who remained in the workplace were also subjected to harm from those they continued to serve. Many key workers were given a wide range of extra roles and responsibilities during the pandemic, including the enforcement of lockdown rules such as mask wearing, social distancing, one-way systems and queuing to access premises (Booyens *et al.*, 2022; Vromen *et al.*, 2021). This left workers vulnerable to backlash from disgruntled consumers and service users who felt inconvenienced by the rules imposed on them.

It was a lot more difficult with the customers because a lot of them wouldn't follow the guidelines. They were confrontational about it at times and that can be quite stressful, even scary at times (Harry).

Changes in job roles did not end there. As lockdown measures continued, companies had to find a way of operating in these unprecedented times. This meant that many workers across the service economy were rapidly required to embrace new ways of working, including further use of technology as that was vital at the time (Shankar *et al.*, 2021). The introduction of new working practices was not without its issues, making way for further frustration from service users:

Work changed a lot because of covid; it was actually ok though. Because people couldn't shop in store, we had to set up a new online system so we could still keep going. It blew up and a lot of people used it, we had a lot of processing. You know, processing orders through, making sure deliveries were done properly and quickly. It was really busy. [...] It was actually ok, well most of the time. There was the odd customer that would kick off about how long it took for their stuff to come, they wanted it within a day or two. We would be as quick as we could, but we had only just started doing online orders because of lockdown and only had one or two delivery vans and that was it at first. We didn't use a delivery service or anything like that, so it took a few days (Nancy).

However, this violence against retail workers is not just a product of the pandemic, it is indicative of wider cultural shifts. In the postmodern era there is a culture of immediacy, people want instant access to goods, services and results. By providing this instant pleasure and satisfaction, businesses can create better customer relations and ultimately, generate further profit (Lloyd, 2018a; Smith and Raymen, 2016). However, this also heightens customer expectations and when these expectations are not met and this level of immediacy is not maintained, it can lead to further abusive behaviour from customers toward staff.

The treatment of service workers, as seen throughout, can also be attributed to cultural changes in the way that people view workers in this sphere. Neoliberal customers have come to view workers in the sector as 'inconsequential others' who will likely never make their way out of their current socioeconomic circumstances and therefore offer little in the way of

symbolic value (Bushell and Braithwaite, 2024). This results in service users exercising a self-awarded, expressive form of special liberty whereby they disregard any moral and ethical principles and allow themselves to treat low-paid service workers as lesser human beings (Hall, 2012):

I had one lady; she basically questioned how I was doing my job. She wanted a box with an item that didn't come with a box, so I just told her that and she just stared at me for 30 to 45 seconds, I have never experienced anything like that before (Simon).

Abusive and demeaning behaviour is widely accepted by those who are subjected to it, with many young people making comments like *'There were good days and bad days, but that's part of the job'* (Stacey). This is also indicative of refeudalization as the relationship between service providers and users is starting to resemble the social hierarchy's and power dynamics seen in pre-modern times (Neckel, 2020; Kotkin, 2023).

Harmful encounters like the ones seen throughout are also created and accepted by the nature of the service industry itself. Neoliberal capitalist ideology promotes a 'customer is always right' attitude at a cultural and institutional level as it protects the interests of the wider economy:

One bloke, I told him we had sold out of this one item, he shouted at me in the middle of the shop floor, I was so embarrassed. It was so bad, the shouting felt like it lasted forever, I was frozen, what was I supposed to do in that situation? [...] The company offered the bloke a gift card for the inconvenience haha. I couldn't believe it, he made me upset, shouted at me at my work for something out of my control and he got the gift card. But it is what it is, we have to keep the customers happy (Stacey).

In this instance, the response of the manager was potentially more harmful than the initial interaction (Lloyd, 2018a). This promotion of customer sovereignty further asserts notions that young people and others working within the service industry hold less worth and that customers hold more socioeconomic value than workers (Korczynski and Evans, 2013), making way for further harm to arise at an individual level within the workplace.

The negative effect of such encounters on young service workers can be severe and wide ranging. Participant reported issues including stress, anxiety and depression, issues with sleep, chronic fatigue and even longer term issues including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Bishop and Hoel, 2008; Bushell, 2023), all of which impact on the overall self-esteem, confidence and wellbeing of young people both inside and outside of the workplace:

Erm, it made me feel a bit stupid really, I gave her a simple answer to a simple question, and it became so much more than that. In terms of the effect on me, it made me self-conscious and doubt myself. I even questioned whether I had done something wrong, or maybe I could have done more to help her (Simon).

Harmful encounters in the workplace, however, are not exclusive to interactions between staff and service workers (see Bishop and Hoel, 2008). Neoliberally informed, overarching structures and institutional practices create a workplace culture that:

‘disavows ethics or moral responsibilities in favour of the bottom line and creates conditions within which competitive co-workers and managers willingly inflict entirely legal harms upon each other’ (Lloyd, 2018a, p.8).

As seen throughout, job security and stability, particularly within the service industry, appears to be a thing of the past as neoliberal ideology promotes profit and wider business needs over those of workers. The felt effects of this were heightened by the pandemic as fear surrounding job losses increased (see Bilal *et al.*, 2022), creating further opportunities for harmful encounters to occur between coworkers:

I was really anxious all the time during the whole thing. I needed to stay furloughed as my partner was a key worker, and so is my stepdaughter's mum. [...] All the childcare fell on me. I spoke to my boss, who I was also very good friends with before, and that, well, that did not help me at all. I told her how I was feeling, you know what she said? She told me I should be worried about redundancies as it will be people like me that will go first. I asked her what she meant by that and she told me that because I worked less hours [...] and because I had to stay on furlough instead of coming back to help the company, my job would be looked at first (Stacey).

The inevitability of pandemic related job losses presented further feelings of insecurity, which in turn enhanced notions of self-preservation and selfish individualism within the workplace. This competitiveness is also not limited to interactions between managers and subordinates or even when jobs are at risk of redundancy and nor is it an issue that is limited to the confines of the pandemic.

Opportunities for career progression, as will be discussed later in this chapter, are limited within the service sector. This gives way for further competitiveness between lower-level workers who may find themselves, or their colleagues and friends, battling it out for a promotion:

It was more the process of dealing with how close we were, and she had been there a lot longer than I had so I kind of felt like I probably wasn't going to get it. Maybe I didn't deserve it ahead of her. Obviously, she's got people who were saying stuff to her, and I've got people that are saying stuff to me and it just kind of made it a bit awkward and it was difficult to deal with. It never got too nasty between us personally, just some passive aggression, but it always felt like we were pitted against each other and yeah it was just a bit tough. [...] When we went for the verbal interview, I went first and my friend followed. It felt a bit like the apprentice haha. All the other staff could see that this was going on and when I came back, they were asking all about it on the shop floor in front of her friends and some were saying 'I hope you get it' because they thought I would be better for the job. It all felt a bit awkward and not nice. I did not want them to put her down. Sure, I wanted the job and would have been a bit disappointed, but I would have been happy either way (Simon).

There is a clear willingness to inflict harm onto others through micro-aggressions and the fuelling of aggressive competition amongst co-workers. Unlike the encounters discussed earlier between service users and workers, these interactions are arguably not the result of staff members attempting to further their own expressive interests, at least not entirely. Though not always as apparent or as visible, the expressive interests of managers and other stakeholders play a part in the interactions between co-workers, aligning more with traditional uses of special liberty:

The competitiveness was not on my behalf I don't think. Well, we both were, I guess. We both did things outside of our jobs to try and be the one to impress the boss and outdo each other. When she would do something good and was praised for it, I would feel like I needed that praise too, you know what I mean? I would go out my way to do something to get myself recognised. I would never try and make her look bad; I just needed to look better. [...] Where I work, promotions are few and far between, it's less on merit and more about who the boss likes the most. The other person going for the job, she was in with the boss. [...] I wasn't part of their little group. People would constantly ask me whether I thought I would get the job because I was going up against a friend of the boss, which kind of reasserted my insecurity around the situation (Simon).

Promotions are not always awarded on merit as forms of favouritism can impact management actions and decisions, leading them to promote the candidate that they already have a beneficial, often transactional, relationship with (see Bal and Dóci, 2018). This at the very least fuels the competitive behaviour amongst coworkers and undermines the confidence of those not being favoured. However, harmful interactions amongst those in competition with each other often occur as employees act in protection of their instrumental needs as they navigate the systemic harms present within the service economy (see Kotzé, 2025). In such unstable economic circumstances, where opportunities for promotion and the small amount of added stability this may offer are few and far in between, it comes as no surprise that many young people in the workplace would risk harm to their colleagues to secure their own economic survival (Kotzé, 2025).

However, no matter what the motivations are behind these acts, they are still inherently harmful actions that have the potential to impact on the lived experiences of young people in the workplace:

You know, it made me feel worse, it felt like she was purposely trying to belittle me. It was like everyone was out for themselves. She said she was just trying to be a good friend and warning me about what could happen. In the end it never happened, but I never felt like I could trust her again, as a boss or a friend really (Stacey).

These encounters evidently create a detrimental, divisive, working environment and, much like harmful encounters with customers, negatively impact on the self-confidence and esteem of those involved. This also calls into question the relationships people develop with their co-workers and employers. Each of the examples presented discuss an element of friendship that they believed to be present before the harmful encounters took place. It could be argued that these relationships lacked any meaningful reciprocation in the first place. As individuals embrace the neoliberal Symbolic Order and its values, they merely build asocial relationships and when necessary, prioritise their own individual needs through acts of selfish competitiveness (See Winlow *et al.*, 2015). Also, where organisations prioritise business and profit over employee relations, workplace relationships are arguably just an 'instrumental exchange', that can be used as a commodity to generate profit and have very little meaning outside of this (Bal and Dóci, 2018, p.539):

I was lucky enough to live with family, and I didn't have to go through the whole thing on my own. But not going to work, with it being most of my social life, I was not able to get as much support through friends as I did before. Because I only speak to people inside of work instead of going out and seeing them or speaking to them online, I lost contact with people at work (Chloe).

Thus, highlighting that, as long as neoliberal values of profit over people and individual self-interest are present within the workplace, these harmful encounters will continue to arise as when it comes to the bottom line, institutions and people will always prioritise their needs over their employees and colleagues.

This section highlights the harms suffered by young people in the workplace at the hands of their managers, co-workers, and service users. In some instances, these encounters have had

such a detrimental impact on the experiential realities of young people, that they have felt forced to make the decision to seek alternative employment:

*Whilst out shopping, I bumped into Heidi and her family. She told me that she was glad to see me as she had a life update since her initial interview. Heidi informed me that, after ten years of working in healthcare, she had left the NHS to work as a receptionist in a non-healthcare setting. This came as a result of the negative experiences she had with both her employer, who underappreciated her during the pandemic despite how much time and effort she put into her role, as well as her patients, from whom she often experienced abuse from during the course of her employment.*

Seeking and changing roles frequently also heightened the turbulence and changeability of workplaces and in that, eroded the sense of stability and security in employment. It is evident that these harmful encounters and the impact they have on young people are a result of changing cultural attitudes towards service workers as well as everyday institutional operations that promote profit over people and create competitive working environments. To provide further context to the circumstances in which these harms are created, the next section of this chapter will take a closer look at the everyday operational practices within the service economy and the broader impact they have on the experiential realities of working young people in Stoke-on-Trent.

### **Operational Harms:**

As young people spend much of their time in the workplace, the everyday operational practises of the institutions they work for have the potential to have a profound effect on their overall experiential realities. Institutional personification of neoliberal ideologies creates working conditions that promote ever changing job descriptions, increased workloads, unstable working hours and low wages. One of the biggest points of contention in the world of employment today is the use of short-term and zero-hour contracts (see Lloyd,2018a: 2018b), which allow for flexible working without promise of set hours or future work:

I had a job over Christmas for a couple of years, doing the trolleys and working on a till at a big shop. It got me some money whilst at uni, but it wasn't like a full-time job type thing, just casual hours now and then when they needed me, so it wasn't very much (Eddie).

The uncertain and ever-changing circumstances surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic increased the demand for such flexible working contracts of employment:

So, the Christmas just before the lockdown I was working in retail. But I, um, finished my seasonal work there in the January so I went up until February 2021 without any additional income other than student loans. I then had a short-term job at a local college which was to do Covid testing. You know, the job was advertised to be around 14 weeks long, with opportunities to stay on after. I thought it might have given me a foot in the door at the college. However, after committing to a week of intense training, they told us we were only getting a week's work out of it. So that kind of put me in a bad situation financially again and unsure of what my next steps would be. I ultimately ended up back in my original retail job as the shop opened up early during lockdown, not where I wanted to be at the time, but it was better than nothing (Simon).

There is very limited, if any, research surrounding job roles that were created specifically by the pandemic as part of the UK government response to tackling its spread. However, these temporary roles, which disappeared as the pandemic came to an end or restrictions and rules changed, created more job roles characterised by insecurity and instability.

Zero-hour contracts are not a new mode of operation as the concept of on-demand staffing, which consists of having a bank of staff readily available when demand is high yet retaining the ability to reduce staffing costs when demands are low, is an essential part of the everyday function of the neoliberal service economy (Koumenta and Williams, 2019). Over 1 million people in the UK were on a zero-hour contract in 2024, many of whom were between the ages of 16 and 24, with the West Midlands having the third highest usage rate in the UK (Brione, Cunningham and Zaidi, 2024).

Zero-hour contracts are also not just a byproduct of hospitality and retail industries as they are also utilised in the wider service economy, including healthcare and education:

Same sort of thing really, the insecurities that come with a zero-hour contract, you know the stability, that guarantee of income at the end of the month. I remember one month during the summer when there was no teaching, I got paid £50. To go from that to, you know, potentially, you know a couple of grand during term time, it was quite a big shock (Steve).

The fiscal consequences of such arrangements are evident, but the wider, every day, impacts of zero-hour contracts on the experiential realities of young people are less visible. Many young people on zero-hour contracts, especially those in higher level service roles, find themselves committing to a workload that far exceeds the fiscal remuneration they receive:

There wasn't any sort of significant changes. I mean I was working a zero-hour contract anyway, so I did rely on the sort of generosity of my employers for paid work, but that was the same before Covid anyway. What I will say though is that, working from home I was doing an awful lot of administrative work that I wasn't necessarily able to claim pay for. So, I suppose you could say, working from home, there's more work to be done but somehow, I was getting less pay (Steve).

Zero-hour contracts are branded as viable alternatives for young people who require flexible working conditions, like those with children or those who wish to gain some experience whilst in education. This gives the illusion that they are of great benefit to young people who find themselves in these circumstances (see Antonucci, 2025). However, in reality, zero-hour contracts legitimise precarious forms of work, allow for exploitation in the work place and increase the instability and insecurity faced by young people (Adams, Adams and Prassl, 2019), the longitudinal impacts of which will be explored in the next section of this chapter.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that the harmful impacts of such precarious working conditions are not recognised at a systemic level. This is evident in recent government consultations on zero-hour contracts (Department for Business and Trade, 2025), the impact of which is yet to be seen or felt on an individual level. The Covid-19 pandemic, in-part, also shed a light on insecure work and the detrimental impact it can have. As a result of lockdowns

and the mass employment insecurity it caused, the government was forced to jump into action with the Job Retention Scheme (JRS). This, however, only came as many in the UK faced job insecurity and potential job losses because of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. Therefore, it did not reduce the types of harm young people were already facing in the workplace as a result of neoliberally informed institutional operations:

I was working part time as the pandemic first hit. I was working at a restaurant café on the weekends. I was furloughed at first, then they rang me part way through to tell me that my job was no longer available. I wasn't earning much anyway, but it was still a bit of a kick in the teeth. They actually told me that they could no longer afford to keep paying my furlough, even though I was under the impression that the government paid. [...] I think because I was getting older, they had to start paying me more, its less money to keep on the younger staff who aren't 18 yet (Taylor).

In fact, the circumstances surrounding the pandemic also provided a convenient cover for employers to further implement cost effective measures and enhance their profitability once restrictions were lifted. In this instance, giving employers the means to lay off young people whose minimum wage is higher than those under the age of 18. This is indicative of wider issues of job retention and security across the UK as young people and those in low paid roles being amongst those most affected by Covid-19 job losses (Powell, Francis- Devine, and Clarke, 2022).

Job security is not the only form of structural harm that the JRS failed to protect young people from. On the contrary, the use of furlough presented further legitimate opportunities for employers to prioritise business needs:

I was furloughed for a month I think it was, and then we went back to help with the deliveries before the store opened again, that was stressful. We got called back in with little notice and it gave me no time to get anything sorted. Obviously other than the hours being different, my job role has changed too, it was just hard to get used to. Then we shut again and then back open again, it was a bit back and forth with it all (Sarah).

Many workers were furloughed more than once across the course of the pandemic, called to return to work with short notice and had their roles altered upon their return. The JRS scheme enabled these harms as institutions saw an opportunity to capitalise on the flexibility it offered, further placing business agendas over the personal wellbeing of individual employees (Lloyd, 2018a). This meant that young people faced increased workplace turmoil during this time, rendering them unable to make any long-term plans for their futures as their working lives were entirely unpredictable (Schneider and Harknett, 2022).

Nonetheless, it was not only young adults who were furloughed during the pandemic that experienced a negative impact to their lives both inside and out of the workplace:

I think as well it was the work life balance. At least when I was coming into the office every day I knew when my workday started and ended. Whereas working from home, I'd find myself working all hours of the day. You know there were days when I was working from 8:00 o'clock in the morning right through to 11:00 o'clock at night. Erm, I knew it wouldn't do me any good really but there weren't any other options as we couldn't really go out anywhere or do anything (Steve).

For many, the lines between personal and work time became blurred as work engulfed the home and personal time took a step to the side (Vaziri *et al.*, 2020; Fisher *et al.*, 2020). Many young people accepted this with limited questioning as to why they were doing more work for the same level of pay or without confronting the harms faced as work became the primary focal point of their lives. The lines between home and work blurred, separating work and home life became impossible. This is arguably a result of the pandemic more broadly, with work becoming a distraction from the emotional impact of lockdowns and subsequent isolation, but in-turn, increased the emotional toll and burn-out that often comes with longer hours and increased workloads.

Similar experiences were also had by those who could attend their workplace in person as:

At one point I was non-stop all the time, I was either at work or at uni. I woke up, I went to uni, came home and went to bed. At the end of my first year at uni I had a ten-week unpaid placement at a vets. I was lucky I could still go because most people couldn't because of lockdown. I worked 42 days in a row. I was at the vets five days a week and working 16 hours at the weekend. It got to a point where I couldn't do it anymore, so I reduced my hours at work. Not that it helped much, they would ring me on my days off to ask if I could come in. The store got really busy during Covid, there were queues to the back of the store sometimes, so I felt bad and went in when I could (Chloe).

With an absence of social contact and limited means to socialise and engage in the activities that would typically monopolise young people's time, many took on extra shifts at work. Though work became an outlet during the pandemic and for many, their working hours and loads increased, this is indicative of a long-standing, wider issue surrounding the culture of work. This chapter has so far discussed the personification of neoliberal values at an institutional level. What this also demonstrates however, is the internalisation of these values at an individual level. Young people, as they are continually told that business comes before them, also take it upon themselves to prioritise the workplace over their own needs:

I think it was because I enjoyed work and I liked being there, I liked my boss and colleagues. I would often pick up extra shifts, like, including late shifts, which I didn't always really have time for. Obviously, it was my decision to take on those extra shifts, but at one point I was working so much I was struggling to get the uni work done (Steve).

This willingness to continue providing extra time and service, even when it causes wider harm, also came from feeling a sense of duty during the pandemic. As the UK government regularly reminded the general public, all individuals played a role in keeping the country afloat, whether that was staying at home to stop the spread of the virus or keeping key provisions open and available (Johnson, 2020):

I was working back-to-back 7-days a week, which wasn't appreciated at all, but as we all know the health care system is underfunded. [...] I already worried about working too much before. During Covid, I could be out the house even longer and sometimes work weekends. Seeing my son and husband became even less than before. [...]

Lockdowns and the pandemic were very stressful for NHS staff because it was like the backbone off the whole entire pandemic. It was a lot of pressure on us (Heidi).

Briggs *et al.* (2021) termed this sacrificial violence as many faced increased harms to protect others. It could be argued that young people were amongst those who sacrificed the most during the pandemic. In favour of protecting the elderly and medically vulnerable, young people were the last to receive the Covid-19 vaccine. Yet, young people were amongst those most exposed to the illness and many continue to suffer from the physical effects of the virus itself:

If an 81-year-old caught covid and dies, yes it was sad and all, but they would only have lived another four years or so. But people my age who are suffering from the health implications of Covid-19 may have to deal with them for another 60 years or so. Obviously there are no longitudinal studies concerning covid as its still all so new, but we could be living with these effects for the rest of our lives (Ken).

Despite being perceived as the lowest at risk of the severe, young people also had to isolate for long periods of time also to protect others. This is further indicative of generational tensions as young people appear to sacrifice their own health, wellbeing and the little stability they have for a generation they already consider as having had it all (see Shaw, 2018). Many young people also continued to attend work during the pandemic despite the growing harms they faced, including repercussions of the virus itself, incidents of workplace violence, higher workloads and increasingly more precarious and unpredictable employment conditions. Yet, no matter how much young people sacrifice or how much of themselves, their time or effort they offer to their place of work, opportunities for promotion, stability and security rarely come their way. This is also indicative of a system that adopts a zero-sum way of thinking. Young people in deprived areas like Stoke-on-Trent remain as the 'losers' of the pandemic and the system more broadly as others benefit from their sacrifices (see Briggs *et al.*, 2021; Ellis *et al.*, 2021). Neoliberally informed operational practices seen in many workplaces feed

into this concept as they ensure that the lives of young people continue to be characterised by insecurity and precarity (see Standing, 2011; 2021):

So, at the time [at the start of lockdown] I was just transitioning into education, but was also working three part-time jobs, so it was a bit wild trying to balance the three things. With coaching, you rarely get a full-time permanent position, its usually smaller contracts or casual work, so I took on more than one job [...] I had just started coaching at the university and I was still working at the football club. It was very much a balance, a bit like a patchwork quilt of jobs as I call it, along with education (Mike).

This is amplified in areas like Stoke-on-Trent where the transition to the service economy has failed to offer anywhere near the same level of fiscal security and overall stability that the industrial economy once offered young people in the city (see Telford, 2022). This has further implications on the stability, progression and transition of young people into adulthood, which will be covered in the final section of this chapter.

### **Progression and Transitional Harms:**

Despite doing things that society today tells them will improve their socioeconomic standing, like gaining an education, improving their skills and working hard (see Kim and Choi, 2017), many young people in Stoke-on-Trent still fail to find suitable employment that offers them the stability they want and need:

*I met Simon, a 27-year-old man, on the Staffordshire University Campus for a discussion around their life as a young person in Stoke-on-Trent. Although Simon and I had already met on a number of occasions before this one, we exchanged pleasantries as we met on the car park and began the walk down the path to Staffordshire University's Ashley building. As the rain commenced, we joked about how this was not an uncommon occurrence here in Stoke and both swiftly entered the building.*

*Despite there being very little time for conversation as we hurried out of the rain, the familiar surroundings of the University must have sparked several memories for Simon. As we settled into my office on the second floor of the building, Simon fondly recounted his days at Staffordshire University, where he completed both his undergraduate and post-graduate studies. He smiled and pointed out of the window explaining how he had spent hours with his peer's playing sports on the fields and pitches just outside. As*

*he sat down, he mentioned that in this very building he did one of his first presentations for his undergraduate degree. Simon ended the discussion by proudly announcing how he got a 1<sup>st</sup> in that presentation.*

*Even with his vast academic achievements, which consist of an undergraduate degree and two post graduate qualifications, Simon later explained how he struggled to progress in his career and find stability in his life. The implementation of several lockdowns during the course of the pandemic and the disruption to his education led to Simon taking on several insecure, zero-hour contracts to ensure he could financially support himself and his family during the pandemic. This ultimately resulted in Simon abandoning his hopes of a post-graduate job all together in favour of settling with the first job that offered him a permanent contract.*

This is indicative of a labour market ‘mismatch’. This refers to someone who is employed within a role that does not require the level of skill, experience or education that they possess or are not employed within a graduate roll that aligns with their subject area. According to Vecchia *et al.* (2023) approximately 33% of graduates are not employed in roles related to the subject they studied and 30% are not in graduate roles at all:

The fact that Covid-19 changed my PGCE so much, I got very little practical experience. So even though I passed the course, I haven’t gone into teaching because I didn’t feel prepared enough. Also, getting a job as a PE teacher in a school in the middle of a pandemic was almost impossible, how can you really teach PE online? I don’t think I will ever go back to it (Simon).

Data collected by the Office for National Statistics (2021) towards the end of the first year of the pandemic indicate that the number of graduates in nongraduate roles between July and September 2020 had decreased by 5.0%. Variations in economic activity during this time were likely responsible for this decrease as sectors that typically house overqualified graduates, such as hospitality and retail, were out of full operation due to the Covid-19 restrictions. Additionally, occupational switching was arguably lower during the pandemic due to the government job retention schemes, as such, the report predicted that mismatch statistics would increase once government support came to an end, emphasising that this is a wider issue facing young people coming out of the education system (see Vecchia *et al.*, 2023).

There were still instances however, where young people felt the need to take on jobs that did not align with their educational attainment or ambitions during the pandemic. This was for a number of reasons including lack of availability of relevant jobs, to earn money or to just fill time:

During that time as well that I was working for Domino's [Pizza] doing deliveries. I was having issues with them straight away. But I didn't want to just sit around at home all day and do nothing, that is difficult to do for me because I am always busy. Putting the uniform on, it was actually really difficult. Something didn't feel right with it. It didn't fit with my ambitions, like how far was I falling if I had to work for Domino's [Pizza], I felt like a failure (Mike).

Not only does this establish how some young people resigned themselves to take on any type of work on offer as jobs of any kind were hard to come by, but it also demonstrates the impact of taking on work that does not align with the ambitions of an individual. As young people actively solicit the neoliberal Symbolic Order, they place value on demonstrating status and success (see Hall, 2020). For those transitioning into adulthood, establishing an honourable career is part of their identity formation and one of the ways they can display their achievements. However, as discussed earlier in this chapter, as a result of cultural shifts in attitudes towards service sector roles and workers (see Neckel, 2020; Kotkin, 2023), jobs in this sector are not necessarily synonymous with personal success. Taking on such roles can therefore make young people feel as though they have failed, placing the blame on themselves and not the structural barriers they face (Winlow and Hall, 2013), such as the state of the local economy in Stoke-on-Trent or the economic uncertainty brought on by the pandemic .

Further barriers were created by the pandemic as in some instances, it even prevented young people from potentially completing the education and training required for many roles outside the lower-level service economy:

Well for 3-months I was doing nothing and then, [to] go back to work and education, it was hard. I would turn off the alarm and go back to bed in the mornings. I don't have the motivation to be there and do it. I wasn't wanting to work from home either because it doesn't suit me in the end, although it did in the beginning. I tried during lockdowns, but it all got too much. When I was supposed to go back after summer, most workshops were online and I had gone back to work, so I wasn't erm, in the right place to start education again. So, I just never went back and now I am full time at my retail job (Peter).

The pandemic caused significant disruption to everyday student life, from remote learning, the reduction of support and the removal of exams to social distancing measures upon their return. As predicted, this had significant consequences on the education, overall wellbeing and futures of those in education at the time (Aristovnik *et al.*, 2023; Raccanello, *et al.*, 2022; Burns, Dagnall and Holt, 2020), in the way that further restricted their ability to find stable, well paid employment that aligns with their education and initial career goals.

Nonetheless, this is not to say that progression, though difficult, is entirely unavailable to those who end up working within low-level service roles:

Supervisor jobs only come up if someone leaves and a department needs someone to step up, that's how I got the job. It isn't like Aldi or anywhere like that where they have progression schemes, it's pretty old fashioned. There are other opportunities across other stores, but you only hear about them if someone from management reaches out, which has actually happened to me. I want to go further in the company, so I have told them I am interested, but not much has come of that yet (Simon).

Progression is more feasible when working for larger, national and international companies, however, for the most part, service work within retail or hospitality is characterised by a lack of opportunity to progress into more senior, well-paid, roles (Mulholland, 2002; Lloyd, 2018a).

Despite progression opportunities being extremely limited within the service economy, there was often the illusion of progression as workers would take on responsibilities that aligned more with the duties of a more senior member of staff, but without the subsequent financial remuneration:

So, I, erm, I am a sales assistant on the tills but, obviously I do extras. Erm, I do refunds, deliveries, take customer phone calls and just help out where I can really. I also make sure everything is ok and everyone settled in their job, make sure everyone's got barcodes for everything. [...] I am given responsibilities that are like the supervisor role and obviously I don't get paid extra or anything like that, I just do it because I'm asked to, I'm trained in it [...] I am too nice. I am quite close with my manager, after lockdown we all became like a very close friends and I know how much she struggles with it and how much she struggles helping everyone so it's just nice to kind of help her (Sarah).

This is indicative of a culture of 'quiet' or 'dry' promotion (The Economic Times, 2023). Quiet promotions take place when an employee is given extra duties without formal alterations to their contracts, title, job description or fiscal remuneration. These promotions are often branded as employee development opportunities that would allow them to progress in their career later. Under neoliberalism however, it is likely that quiet promotions are more in line with cost-saving, profit generation agendas rather than genuine opportunities for staff to upskill and develop before promotion.

The notion of taking on extra responsibilities under the guise of professional development is not exclusive to retail and hospitality environments:

[...] I probably went a bit above and beyond in terms of what I needed to do without being paid to do so. Even when, you know, even before the pandemic. Even before lockdown, you know, I'd be going into the office every day and you know, I'd be there from like 8:00am till 5:30pm. [...] making sure that I had a presence in the workspace because I felt like that was the best way. If I put in the hours now, it would benefit me later on when it came to getting, you know opportunities to get a permanent contract, so I wanted to make sure that [...] I have sort of a visible presence in the workspace. [...] when I first started, I was doing maybe between 4 and 6 hours of teaching a week and so that's what I would get paid for [...]. But like I said, I would spend most of the day in the office prepping for other classes, doing admin duties and stuff like that and that technically is supposed to be included in my hourly paid rates but I don't think it truly reflects the extensive work that needs doing. [...] Well, it was largely one of my colleagues, he sort of took me under his wing and mentored me and he basically said, 'look if you put the grunt work in now, if you put in the hours now and show people that you are reliable and dependable, it will serve you and benefit you in the long run'. So, I just took his advice and that's what I did (Steve).

Teachers and other educators are amongst those clocking in the most amount of unpaid overtime in the UK, which is often attributed to their measureless workloads (Papagiannaki *et al.*, 2021). Nonetheless, as seen with other service economy roles, it is also the promise of personal and professional development that leads to many young people, who are often new to these roles and lack experience, working beyond their job descriptors. Unremunerated work however, no matter the motive behind it, contributes to the precarious nature of youth, monopolises the time of young people, often without little reward, fiscal or other (Standing, 2011; 2021) and hinders their overall progression.

Lockdown measures and the shutdown of large sections of the service economy further reduced opportunities for career growth. In some, albeit extreme, instances, the wider social circumstances created by lockdowns even meant that some young people had to take a step back in their career:

I eventually stepped down from being a supervisor, I felt like I had to. There was so much pressure to come back full-time, you know, after the first lockdown. My place was one of the first to open back up. But I still had my kids at home. I couldn't afford to lose the money, but I had to put my family first (Stacey).

In the UK between April to June 2021, 75.6% of mothers with dependent children were employed in some capacity within the workforce, this is up 10.01% from 66.5% in 2002 (Office for National Statistics, 2022a). 92.1% of fathers with dependent children were also employed, which is an increase of 2.5% from 89.6% in 2002 (Office for National Statistics, 2022a). It is unsurprising that lockdown measures impacted on the careers of parents as restrictions meant that many children were educated online at home. Stefanova, Farrell and Latu (2023) found that this was particularly true for women who worked from home as many took on a disproportionate share of caring and household responsibilities during the pandemic and spent significantly less time on their careers and workload than their male partners. The

impact of which had the potential to have lasting effects on progression and financial stability beyond the pandemic as promotion opportunities were lost or as seen above, backwards career moves were needed to prioritise other areas of life.

For other young people who are yet to buy a house or start a family, the lack of progression opportunities and low wages within the service economy are arguably responsible for their inability to attain these milestones associated with adulthood:

When I first started, I was on minimum wage, which you know, enables you to get by if you are good with your money, which we are, I think. I have had a little pay rise now as I am a supervisor, I am on £1 an hour more than minimum wage. This makes things a little more comfortable. We can still save for our future, but I must admit, it is probably taking longer than it would have if I was in a better job (Simon).

In 2023, the average salary of full-time workers in Stoke-on-Trent was £30,520, approximately 12.7% lower than the national average (Office for National Statistics, 2023). This makes building savings, buying a house and earning enough to sustain a family more difficult, all of which are indicative of a transformation into adulthood (Hochberg and Konner, 2020). Thus, further expanding on the time it takes for young people to come out the other side of this transitory period (Hayward, 2024).

Nonetheless, lack of progression opportunities, are not the only way in which the culture of work and workplace practices hindered the transition into adulthood during the pandemic:

It is quite difficult, but you have to make ends meet. I am trying to buy a house, so you have to get those, urgh, pennies in whilst you can. [...] Yeah, so obviously the mobile, my self-employed work, I got nothing because I wasn't self-employed long enough. Erm, I understood that as it was something the government had to do, erm. My other jobs did sort out really quickly with the money. But with trying to save for a house and I was currently living in a house, and I was at home more so I was using more electricity, eating more, so I actually couldn't afford to save for my house during those lockdown times, I couldn't save. So, with less money than what it should have been and then also not doing my self-employed as well, it was a lot harder just living on that amount

of money. Of course, I felt disappointed in myself that I couldn't save, but I had to make the sacrifice and just not get my house yet (Marie).

As the pandemic took hold in the UK and the government put in place strict lockdowns, high levels of workers across the country were at risk of unemployment (Lu *et al.*, 2023), particularly those who worked in the service industry as working from home arrangements were often not possible. As mentioned previously, to prevent mass job losses, the government introduced the JRS that allowed for workers to be furloughed and paid up to 80% of their wages. However, the loss in wages and lack of protection for those who were self-employed or had not been employed in their roles long enough meant that many still faced financial difficulties during this time. Although not everyone who was furloughed experienced a negative impact to their financial situation:

I was furloughed and started doing my uni work from home, online lectures that sort of thing. That actually helped my finances and my savings, staying at home. I saved on fuel costs as it was a 50-minute drive to and from uni, so the fuel money could go elsewhere, and I couldn't go anywhere to spend money (Chloe).

Household savings went up during the pandemic because of 'forced savings' (Office for National Statistics, 2022b). Forced savings, however, were merely a byproduct of the pandemic as consumption opportunities were significantly reduced. Thus, not a luxury often afforded to young people in less extreme times, during which wages often do not cover the basics of living.

It would also be disingenuous to suggest that employment conditions are the only reason why young people are unable to save for their futures. As mentioned in the last chapter, though young people in Stoke-on-Trent may be able to avoid embodying some tenants of neoliberal ideology in their entirety, it appears that values associated with consumerism appear to be more impactful and unwavering trait in the subjectivities of young people:

One piece of advice I would give anyone is to stay at home, live with your parents as long as you can. I could go out for a meal, go out with friends, go on holidays and things like that whenever I wanted. I stayed with my mum, so I didn't have the responsibilities of a house or anything like that. I was very lucky to be home and have the space and money to be able to do those things (Nancy).

At first glance, it appears that those transitioning into adulthood are denied the traditional pathway markers that characterise 'adulthood' such as the ability to move out of the family home, get on the property ladder and achieve other milestones indicative of increased independence in favour of other pursuits of consumption. Capitalism has a way of selling itself to young people to keep itself in operation, a byproduct of which is the bidirectional process of adultification of children and more importantly here, the vast expansion of the transition into adulthood (Hayward, 2024; Barber, 2008). However, the Symbolic Order of neoliberal capitalism achieves this by promoting values of consumerism and competitiveness which, as mentioned before, leave young people in a state of wanting and needing what others around them have, which equally feeds into the felt effects absence (Lloyd, 2018a). Which means that this process does not just occur in a vacuum. It is a combination of consumer values and absence of stability caused by the cost-of-living crises, housing prices and unstable and insecure employment conditions that have led more young people to 'choose' to remain in the family home longer:

*I live with my boy, partner, mum and stepdad. We added an extension on my mum's home so that we could continue living with her when my son came along. Me and my partner both work but it was easier, more cost effective to stay at home. [...] We had a small deposit available, but we didn't have a full deposit, so we thought that's not really going to be a great option for us. Plus, we had some bills to pay off with Brighthouse and the Car and MOT (Nancy).*

Many young people in Stoke-on-Trent have demonstrated throughout that they do have a desire to get married and gain independence. However, as this is becoming more unattainable for many, it is logical to suggest that young people would redirect their wants and desires

towards more attainable consumer goals such as getting the latest phone, keeping up with fashion trends and going on holiday. This is arguably less harmful than the neoliberal structures that allow for chronic instability, however, it all plays a role in the reproduction of harmful neoliberal ideology (Winlow, 2019; Winlow and Hall, 2017).

This chapter documents the undeniably harmful impact work can have on the experiential realities of young people today. The working lives of young people, particularly in the service sector, are often characterised by harmful encounters, everyday instability, insecurity and increased workplace pressures as a result of neoliberally informed institutional practices and operations that place business and customers over individuals, their comfort and their needs. The harm they experience extends further than their daily lives as it affects their overall ontological security and ability to progress in their careers and through the stage's indicative of a transition into independence. Inevitably, this impacts on the overall wellbeing, security and stability of young people more broadly and further prolongs the experience of youth for many. The broader impact of this insecurity combined with wider cultural trends on young people at an individual level as they internalise their perceived failure to succeed in finding security and stability will be the focus of the third and final empirical data chapter.

## **Chapter 8: The Health and Wellbeing of Young People: The Physical Scars of Neoliberalism**

Neoliberally informed economic imperatives in the UK have the potential to create a plethora of unintended consequences, including harmful implications on the physical and mental health of many. This is especially true for those living in areas like Stoke-on-Trent where high levels of deprivation make way for a myriad of health inequalities across the city. As such, this chapter will start by detailing the harmful conditions in Stoke-on-Trent resulting from overarching economic structures and local nuances and how they place the health and wellbeing of young people in harm's way. These preexisting conditions within Stoke-on-Trent meant that its residents were more likely to be disproportionately impacted by the Covid-19 virus and subsequent government response, therefore the second section will examine both the immediate and lasting impact of the pandemic on the mental and physical health of young people in the city. In the wake of the failure of overarching systems to protect the health of many young people, the third and final section will focus on how young people respond to and the mechanisms they use to mitigate these failures. This will ultimately allow this chapter to shed light on wider cultural shifts and trends around wellbeing and the impact they have on the experiential realities of young people more broadly.

### **Why Mental and Physical Health?**

It is a well-known fact that the transitory period into adulthood is one that is characterised by anxiety, mood fluctuations, addiction and other mental health concerns (see Arnett, Žukauskienė, and Sugimura, 2014). In the year between 2023 and 2024, 25.8% of young people in the UK aged 16-24 had a common mental health condition, which is an increase of 8.3% from 2007 (NHS England, 2025). Young people are also more likely than those in older

age groups to experience lifelong self-harm or be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and ADHD (NHS England, 2025). Stoke-on-Trent also sees above average levels of common health conditions as in 2022/23 18.6% of residents had a diagnosis of depression compared to the national average of 13.3% (Director of Public Health, 2024; see also Barker and Kirk-Wade, 2024). Suicide and self-harm rates in the city are also above national averages. Between 2020 and 2022, there were 16 suicides per 100,000 people in the city, compared to the national average of 10.3 per 100,000 people (Director of Public Health 2024). Thus, demonstrating that the issue of mental health is not only as an issue of youth, but also of locale.

It is not just the mental health of those living in Stoke-on-Trent that is at greater risk however, as the physical health of those living in the city is typically below the national average. As outlined earlier in this thesis, the city sees increased levels of infant death rates, obesity and drug, alcohol and smoking addiction and related physical health complications (Director of Public Health 2023; Stoke-on-Trent Health and Wellbeing Board, 2021). The life expectancy of both men and women within Stoke-on-Trent is also below the national average (Director of Public Health, 2023). This is a result of higher levels of, mostly preventable, premature deaths in the city, most of which are caused by cancer, cardiovascular disease and more recently, Covid-19 (Director of Public Health, 2023).

What is the Harm?

Though deindustrialisation contributed vastly to the 'left behind status' of Stoke-on-Trent, other neoliberal economic imperatives like measures of austerity are also to blame. These cost saving measures, many of which have taken place since the 2008 financial crash, saw cuts to welfare and local government services. In addition to the harms caused by the inability of

the city to find purpose and stability within today's service economy, these cuts left many young people in post-industrial areas, like Stoke-on-Trent, facing further poverty, deprivation and socioeconomic uncertainty (see Etherington, Jones and Telford, 2022; Telford, 2022), all of which contribute towards increased exposure to the mental and physical health conditions (see NHS, 2021). The increased demand caused by these health inequalities in addition to funding shortfalls also means that UK based health facilities often provide inadequate services (Committee of Public Accounts, 2025), continuing the cycle of health inequality. Not only are these the conditions in which the most deprived members of society entered into the pandemic, but the UK government response was also informed by the same neoliberal, cost saving, economy first imperatives that created much of these inequalities in the first place, thus exposing young people in areas like Stoke-on-Trent to further harm (Briggs *et al.*, 2021). Despite the presence of systemic harm, as neoliberal subjects, young people look inwards at themselves for answers, or in other words, retreat into subjectivity (Winlow and Hall, 2013). In blaming themselves and their personal failures for the deprivation and health inequalities they face, a perceived responsibility falls to them at an individual level to fix it. To do so, they solicit the overarching, neoliberal Symbolic Order, which encourages the employment of special liberty whereby young people are willing to risk harm to others to protect their own expressive or intrinsic needs (Hall, 2012). Arguably more importantly however, neoliberal logic promotes the embodiment of individual responsibility for one's own health, happiness and success through quests to improve one's physical condition, beauty and wellbeing. Which has the potential to expose young people to further harm, especially in relation to their welfare, mental wellbeing and even their financial stability.

In looking at both social structures as well as individual behaviour and subjectivities, this chapter will demonstrate the vast impact neoliberal logic and socioeconomic systems have on the health and wellbeing of young people and how these impact on their everyday realities.

### **Young People of Stoke-on-Trent- Starting Off on The Back Foot:**

As mentioned above, deindustrialisation and other forms of neoliberal logic like measures of austerity have led to Stoke-on-Trent becoming synonymous with deprivation and hardship (see Etherington *et al.*, 2023; Etherington, Jones and Telford, 2022):

*There are tell-tale signs of poverty, deprivation and social inequality around almost every corner in Stoke-on-Trent. Much of the landscape is characterised by visible decay as many buildings that once housed restaurants and shops have been left unattended and unmaintained. Fire damage, broken windows and half collapsed buildings are a regular sight across the city. This dilapidation also extends to domestic dwellings, of which, many are small, aging, terrace houses. A significant proportion of homes in Stoke-on-Trent were built in the mid-late 1800s to house pottery factory workers. Yet, despite the often cramped and less than adequate condition many are now in, they are still occupied by locals approximately 150 years later. The condition of the streets and roads tell a similar tale as litter and fly tipping can be found in every town, another visible indicator that the area is not looked after and maintained well by local authorities or residents alike.*

*Grand-tour observations of Stoke-on-Trent took me past job centres in both Longton and Hanley on several occasions. Each time I walked or drove by the Longton branch it seemingly became busier and busier as large queues could be seen forming outside during one of my later tours of the area. In response to the obvious socioeconomic hardship across the city, many of the individual towns house foodbanks and other charities geared at supporting deprived families, disadvantaged youth and homelessness. The support for the latter is visible as signs of homelessness can be seen across the city. Sleeping bags and belongings left in doorways in the city centre, tents, clothes and remnants of recent fires in local parks and people sleeping outside of McDonalds and Tesco were all but a few examples I witnessed as I walked the streets of Stoke-on-Trent.*

Multiple indicators of deprivation are prevalent in the city of Stoke-on-Trent (see Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019), all of which can be social determinants of both mental and physical health inequalities. One such indicator is employment and income deprivation. As seen in the previous chapter, wages in Stoke-on-Trent are lower than

the national average (Director of Public Health, 2023) and the insecure nature of the economy and current employment conditions, younger generations are finding it increasingly more difficult to find secure employment that offers them any sense of security and stability:

I think its gonna impact on buying a house, mortgages are gonna be harder to get. With all the petrol going up now or more things are going up in price, so I think that will have a big impact on things. I am certainly worried about how this will impact my future, erm, especially moving out of my parents and urgh, getting on with my life (Eddie).

Young people across the UK are demonstrating increased concern for their futures, which has wider impacts on their health, particularly in relation to increased anxiety (NHS England, 2025). As with most indicators of deprivation and health inequalities, this is a self-reinforcing issue where the effect becomes part of the cause as further social and financial insecurity often follows increased health related issues. For some, it means going onto long-term or permanent sickness benefits, which is common in Stoke-on-Trent (Etherington and Jones, 2021). For others, particularly young people who feel they cannot afford to not be in employment, it means continuing to work with increased use of often unpaid sick days, which places both their financial security and health at further risk:

You always have to worry about that side, the finances I mean and the security of your job. I did not always want to take time off when I was ill for that reason. Every time my kids were sick as well, I'd have to go in work on no sleep because I could not take time off. My son had chicken pox and he had to have 11 days off. I had one night off from exhaustion because I had to look after him and not sleep in the day. In my return to work I was questioned on why I did not find alternative childcare. They put it in my record as sickness, which can jeopardise your job later on (Stacey).

Thus, adding to the precarious nature of youth as employment insecurity and income volatility are increased by health inequalities and vice versa (Standing, 2011; 2021).

A further consequence of income deprivation and caps on welfare and housing benefits (see Department for Work and Pensions, 2025) is inadequate living conditions, including homelessness and poor-quality housing (Stoke-on-Trent Health and Wellbeing Board, 2021).

Also, as seen in the previous chapter, many young people today remain in the family home for longer due to the employment insecurity and financial deprivation they face. The cramped conditions and lack of personal space these conditions can create were made worse by the UK government response to the pandemic as people were forced to stay in and work from home:

Being at home wasn't all good either, cus it was me and my partner living with parents, so obviously all in one house and all working from home. So, then we had to do the whole sharing the kitchen table, or one of us on the sofa, another at the other end of the room. [...] I did you know, get a little bit deflated, massively bored because I'd just be sitting in one space and seeing the same four walls all day (Layla).

Poor-quality housing and correlating living conditions like cramped environments, noise, mould, damp and cold can both cause and worsen preexisting mental and physical health conditions (Institute of Health Equality, 2020), including the spread of diseases and viruses like Covid-19:

My mum and sister got it [Covid-19], that was a pain. They were the only two to get it so they shared a room and some of us slept downstairs. Staying out of each other's way and staying clean was hard work. We have one bathroom and its downstairs. They had to wear masks and gloves just to go the toilet and they would clean and we would also go in and clean after as well. We would deliver their meals wearing masks and leave them outside the door. How we all did not catch it I will never know. It was so stressful honestly (Eddie).

The lack of space afforded to young people during this time had a clear impact on their mental wellbeing more broadly.

As is common in deprived locales like Stoke-on-Trent, smoking and other forms of addiction are also a key cause of health inequality (Director of Public Health, 2023; Stoke-on-Trent Health and Wellbeing Board, 2021):

My smoking got worse during the pandemic, I smoked a fair amount before, but the boredom just got to me. I probably smoked 15-20 fags a day during the pandemic. It affected my health. It gave me a tight chest and I couldn't do much with my kids. They love getting on the trampoline during the lockdowns and I just couldn't, I wasn't fit enough. I have health anxiety, so I would spiral out of control with that, with my

breathing I mean. I have quit now, but it took a long time. I still feel the effects sometimes, if I get a cold, my chest is the first to get bad (Stacey).

Alongside other social determinants like economic background, age, gender and education, smoking puts people at risk of wider health issues, including the increased risk associated with the Covid-19 virus (Jackson *et al.*, 2021). Despite this, as is common in deprived areas (Director of Public Health, 2023; Stoke-on-Trent Health and Wellbeing Board, 2021), many young people in Stoke-on-Trent smoke and continued to do so throughout the pandemic.

Smoking was not the only detriment of health that was worsened by the pandemic however, as alcohol consumption increased also (Angus *et al.*, 2024). There is also a culture of alcohol consumption within Stoke-on-Trent (see Hodgkinson, 2025), with many participants expressing that they spent their free time engaging in the nighttime economy:

I was working part-time, so I'd probably do a few hours in the day, probably about [a] 7 hour shift but then have more time basically at the weekend. I probably drank a bit more and would go out drinking on the weekends. Just as simple as that (Lily).

Once lockdown restrictions came to an end not only did young people return to such behaviours, for some, their alcohol consumption actually increased:

Urm, I can only speak for me and my mates, but like since the end of lockdown, going on nights out and getting pissed up, it's kinda gone to the next level, its literally all the fucking time like. But I think it was bound to happen like, you look at the end of the first world war and stuff like that, they were fucking, not drunks, but were drinking a lot and a lot of sex (Paul).

This increased alcohol consumption brings further long-term health issues and health inequalities, which Angus *et al.* (2024) found will most likely impact on the most deprived areas in the UK.

It is these social determinants, such as the conditions in which people are born and grow up, habits and behaviours, peer groups, employment conditions and status as well as poverty and

deprivation amongst others that create health inequalities in areas like Stoke-on-Trent. The far-reaching impacts of such socioeconomic conditions are evident:

Stoke-on-Trent is one of the most deprived areas in England, ranked 13th out of 317 local areas, with more than half of the city's residents currently living in areas classed as being among the most deprived nationally. These factors not only affect life expectancy but also impact on a much wider range of health levels and outcomes throughout people's lives, and even before they are born (Stoke-on-Trent Health and Wellbeing Board 2021, p.47).

Many young people in the city therefore experienced multiple physical and mental health related issues, even prior to the pandemic. However, the healthcare provisions in Stoke-on-Trent are unequipped to deal with such demands due to lack of funding and over demand:

*When talking to a colleague about my ventures around the city, I mentioned that I had recently walked around Stoke. 'Stoke, where is that? Isn't that the name of the city?' my colleague replied. Despite the town being one of the less well-known areas of the city, or perhaps its name confuses those not originally from the area, Stoke was once the official city centre. As such, ethnographic observations of the city would not be complete without a tour of the town once crowned the city's epicentre. Despite the grandeur of the town hall and the plethora of old pubs to visit, Stoke no longer has much to offer. However, it is home to the Royal Stoke University Hospital. When I walked by the hospital I was met with a picket line of NHS staff. The signs they held high read 'Save our NHS' and 'My Patients Cough Up More Than Rishi'. The message was loud and clear, the NHS is underfunded and suffering as a result.*

In addition to healthcare staff who find themselves working in such stressful, low paid conditions, it is the health and care provided to young people and others in the city that pay the ultimate price for an underfunded NHS:

I was suffering from poor mental health, even before the pandemic. I am now on my fourth type of medication, which thankfully is finally working. Mental health support has always been poor in Stoke-on-Trent (Ken).

As touched on throughout, it is these preexisting conditions, created by neoliberally informed economic imperatives, that lead to the disproportionate and ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the most deprived and disadvantaged (Briggs *et al.*, 2021), the wider

implications of which on the health and wellbeing of young people in Stoke-on-Trent will be explored in the remainder of this chapter.

### **Health- The Impact of Neoliberally Informed Socioeconomic Structures:**

Mental Health:

Žižek (2021, p.102) predicted that the Covid-19 pandemic would lead to ‘collective madness itself, or the looming collapse of our mental health’. This predication proved somewhat true as the vast impact lockdowns had on mental health soon became evident, with young people amongst those most effected (O’Connor *et al.*, 2021). At the start of the pandemic, it was the use of lockdowns to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus that initially sparked the downward trajectory in the mental health of young people:

I know it sounds really weird, but before lockdown I was never really alone. I went from that to always being alone all-day during lockdown and literally only having the kitten to talk to. I would take the cat outside for little bit [...], but not being able to really socialise was hard. We'd go sit in the front garden and talk to the neighbours sometimes. But in general, I felt quite alone. [...] I wasn't in the best place obviously. I tried my hardest to keep busy and get myself out of bed. I had my roommate too, but I was in my own thought bubble during that period and didn't feel like I was able to talk to anyone (Anna).

It was the vast disruption to our everyday lives that inevitably caused these trends in mental health. As youth is characterised as a time of socioeconomic activity, busy lifestyles were not uncommon amongst young people prior to the pandemic, placing them at risk of higher levels of disruption to their everyday lives (Smyth and Nolan, 2022). When not working, young people often filled their time with socialising and spending time with family and friends:

I'd mostly just go about my business really. I'd spend a lot of time with my family. I listen to music a lot, usually on YouTube. I'd have somebody round or I'd go to see someone most evenings like my nan, parents or a friend. [...] And then on the weekends I would normally go out and go for a drink and do all them sort of things with my friends. Like go to the club, again listening to music and live bands and that kind of thing really. I liked to go out to raves too (Alex).

As the Covid-19 virus spread and the UK government made the call for lockdowns to commence, the ability to lead such active lifestyles quickly disappeared:

The biggest one for me was probably that it was hard to fill that time up when at home alone during lockdowns. If you are the sort of person who doesn't enjoy your own company, worries a lot and can get carried away with your own thoughts, then it's not the ideal scenario to be in. [...] I've got friends up and down the country, and it was really hard for me not to be able to just get up and go and see them and check how they are doing. I suppose that also applied to the ones who only live down the road too, as you couldn't just pop in for a brew or a chat like you normally would (Alex).

Social connectivity not only makes up a significant proportion of the daily lives of young people, but it is also considered to play a key role in their overall mental health and wellbeing (see Dedryver and Knai, 2021). As in-person contact with close family and friends reduced significantly during the course of the pandemic and, as seen in the last chapter, young people lost touch with those on the periphery of their social circles, like work, it is unsurprising that their mental health suffered as a result.

However, it must be noted that not all young people refrained from having physical contact with their friends and family during periods of lockdown. Though the primary focus of this chapter thus far has been on the systemic harms created or amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic, it is important to note that the unintended consequences of lockdowns on mental health also gave rise to the production of harm at an individual level. Feelings of boredom and isolation and the wider impact they had on mental health and wellbeing led to some young people breaking lockdown rules, despite the well-known risks associated with spreading the virus:

Personally, I didn't really stop seeing them completely. So, me and some of my friends [...] we'd just go and walk around together and have a chat about the madness of everything going on (Layla).

This could easily be considered as a selfish display of special liberty as those involved in breaking the rules place their own expressive interests related to freedom and socialisation before others (see Hall, 2012), disregarding the implications their actions could have on the physical health of others or the already struggling health provisions in the UK (see Briggs *et al.*, 2021). However, as stopping the spread of the virus and protecting the wider economy were the main priorities of the UK government, the impact on mental health was at most an afterthought and worst, inconsequential, as it was an unintended byproduct of the successful function of lockdowns. As such, it could be argued that young people felt they had to take action to support their own mental health in an attempt to offset the harms they face as they were forced to stay in doors to protect the wider interest of the country:

I lived a very active life before Covid-19 and the lockdowns hit, so it was a big change for me. I was doing all of this stuff and then the government says you can't go out, you can't be with more than so many people when you do go out, you can only go to the shops for essentials, and on top my work and education pretty much stopped. [...] But after a while, it was just you know, tedious. Day to day having the same routine, but you know there's not much you can do when being told you can't go out or do anything. So, we just did our best to try and stay entertained. [...] Yeah, that did mean breaking the rules sometimes. We tried not to, but things just got too much, too cramped and then as I said, it was tedious. We met with friends at the park, socially distanced of course, but just to gain back some sanity (Simon).

The need for young people to take individual responsibility for their own health and wellbeing as a result of both systemic failures and cultural shifts that place blame and responsibility on individuals (Winlow and Hall, 2013) will be examined in more depth in the last section of this chapter. However, what is important here is that this arguably demonstrates that the behaviour of young people is more likely informed by intrinsic motivations, whereby individuals still employ special liberty and risk harm to others, but in an attempt to protect themselves (see Kotzé, 2025), in this case, from the negative consequences of isolation and boredom brought on by lockdowns.

Social isolation and loneliness, however, was only the start of the issues faced by young people throughout the course of the pandemic:

It's quite difficult to try and explain how I felt because I didn't know how I felt. I just felt like it's because I didn't know how long these lockdowns were gonna last for. Erm, because I think the third lockdown lasted longer than the first one if I remember rightly. Erm, but anyway, they just felt never ending (Marie).

The use of multiple, often unpredictable, lockdowns spanning across almost two years (Institute for Government, 2021) ensured that youth was further characterised by instability and lack of personal progression as the attainment of milestones indicative of increased independence took longer and were arguably harder to achieve during the time:

Well, I was actually looking for houses before the first lockdown began and I began to think about moving out of my parents' home. I got a mortgage deal sorted and all that kind of stuff and obviously as soon as the first lockdown hit it was quite difficult to go about these things then. I had to arrange all sorts of things to do with the from you know, getting my mortgage deals extended and those sorts of things. Then there was the new position at work and not being able to go out and see friends. The whole thing just brought my energy levels down and I couldn't even think about the house for a little while, so it brought the whole thing near to a complete stop. It did sort of feel like life in general had come to a pause really (Alex).

The impact of such precarity and lack of progressional achievement ultimately took its toll on the long-term ontological instability felt by young people.

As the pandemic and subsequent restrictions continued long past what most ever could have imagined, the more this uncertainty had an impact on the mental health of young people:

The first one was a bit of a novelty. It was scary as well. [...] I made the most of being at home with the nice weather by doing my garden and doing things around the house while we could because I never normally had the time. [...] After Christmas, we had that third lockdown and that really hit me. Because I thought, this just could keep going on, and my mental health, I was not myself. I am normally quite a perky person and try and upbeat everybody, but I was just really down in myself. [...] I like structure in my life, to have that completely withdrawn away and no real help or updates was hard. I think whereas we knew it was only going to be a three-week lockdown on the 2nd lockdown, the first one was a novelty, but the last one it just seemed as if we didn't know how long it was going to take (Marie).

What this suggests is that the isolation, loneliness, instability and uncertainty caused by the pandemic effected many young people, not just those with preexisting mental health conditions, thus further demonstrating the inherently harmful nature of such measures.

However, it is important to note, given the prevalence of mental health conditions amongst young people in Stoke-on-Trent (Director of Public Health, 2024; see also Barker and Kirk-Wade, 2024), that lockdowns and other non-pharmaceutical interventions employed by the UK government to tackle the Covid-19 virus also increased the felt effects of pre-existing mental health conditions:

We were quite strict with the restrictions though. Erm, with my parents both working in the NHS. But it also gave us a way of getting out the house, urm, especially earlier on before work opened up again. As they were still working I would have to take them and drop them off from work and pick them up again. We had a routine, wearing masks in the car, putting clothes straight in the wash and showering as soon as we got in as we were sometimes worried about them bringing something home from work. Which was really where my OCD kicked in (Peter).

The new reality of having to wear masks, social distancing and sanitising anything you came into contact with to protect oneself and others from the potentially life-threatening consequences of the pandemic increased symptoms amongst those already experiencing anxiety related disorders such as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) (Dennis, McGlinchey and Wheaton, 2023).

This leads on to another harmful consequence of the UK government approach to tackling Covid-19. So far, this section has focused on the isolation, boredom, loneliness, insecurity and uncertainty caused by the use of lockdowns. However, the mental health crisis that arose out of the pandemic can also undoubtedly be attributed to the bombardment of messages that outlined the risks of the Covid-19 virus and the importance of the measures that must be taken to prevent it from transmitting. The messages aimed to spread fear throughout the public domain as a way of ensuring the people adhered to the rules (Scientific Advisory Group

for Emergencies, 2020), despite the broader, albeit unintended, implications this tactic had on mental health:

I have really bad anxiety, I've been in bed for hours on extreme days. So, when I first saw bits about it on the news about Covid and how it was very bad and stuff like that, it wasn't good for me. I was cleaning all the rooms more than once a day. I'd clean all the door handles, wipe clean the sides, the kids toys, things like that. It was upsetting and scary (Phil).

This fear expanded to beyond just concern surrounding the impact of the virus itself. In providing an overview of her book, *'A State of Fear: How the UK Government Weaponised Fear During the Covid-19 Pandemic'*, Dodsworth (2021, p.2) explains the broad phenomenon of fear that occurred across the pandemic:

Fear of the virus. Fear of Death. Fear of change, fear of the unknown. Fear of ulterior motives, agenda and conspiracy. Fear for the rule of law, democracy, the western liberal way of life. Fear of loss: losing our jobs, our culture our, connections our health, our minds. It's also about how the government weaponized our fear against us- supposedly in our best interests-until we were one of the most frightened countries in the world.

Though some concern was expressed regarding the UK government response to the pandemic, many institutions including the media and even the political opposition maintained a pro-government stance throughout the pandemic, supporting the tough measures and continuously pushing the public health rhetoric (Briggs *et al.*, 2021). In turn, failing to put a stop to the use of harmful tactics to contain the Covid-19 virus that have had long-term negative impacts on the most disadvantaged members of society, including those looked at more broadly in the chapter and the incitement of fear more specifically:

Well, with my friends because obviously you couldn't organise anything or really do anything face to face, I found it hard. There were times where I didn't know what the rules were. I had to stop watching the news, it was scaring me too much. Every time it was on the TV, all they talked about were new cases, death tolls, how long lockdowns were going to last. It got too much, so I made the decision not to put it on. I didn't really organise things with friends because I didn't know if I was allowed (Heidi).

The fear and anxiety felt by young people during the pandemic undoubtedly increased as a result of concerns over the virus itself as well as the UK government response.

However, increased fear and anxiety have long been synonymous with youth (see Arnett, 2006a) and a lot can be said about its presence in today's society more broadly. As mentioned previously, fear itself is often a consequence of absences caused by current neoliberal structures, including the absence of stability, security and adequate political representation and protection. All of which have been documented throughout as informing the experiential realities of young people today, especially those in deprived areas like Stoke-on-Trent. The heightened presence of fear and anxiety today has also been informed by cultural shifts as the neoliberal Symbolic Order promotes a culture of selfish individualism and competition as well as 'us vs. them' mentalities (see Lloyd, 2018a), which increases the felt effects of absence even further:

I do get a bit of FOMO [fear of missing out] when I see my mates' buying houses, getting a new car or even going on holiday. I see that kinda stuff on socials and it makes me want it sooner as well (Simon).

Haidt and Lukianoff (2018) contend that, with the addition of shifts away from resilience towards safety, overprotection and fragility, the culture present in western societies today is making younger generations more anxious and prone to distress whilst also leaving them unequipped to deal with the problems that life throws at them. That being said, it is arguable that, with the presence of such cultural values, much fear and anxiety felt by young people today is unwarranted (see Hall and Winlow, 2025; Hayward, 2024; Haidt and Lukianoff; 2018). Nonetheless, the felt effects of such distress are very real and have very real and severe consequences:

I was depressed, suicidal like. Erm, that was finally when I thought fucking hell, I'm gonna have to get counselling [...]. So, [...] I finally had my first assessment yesterday.

I've had the first appointment, that was just like an assessment, but I've got wait till people get discharged, it's taking weeks (Paul).

#### Physical Health:

Unlike the coverage that mental health gets, physical health is something that often gets overlooked when looking at the overall experiential realities of young people. As highlighted earlier in this chapter however, due to the prevalence of health inequalities in Stoke-on-Trent (see Etherington, Jones and Telford, 2022), it is an important factor in the lives of young people. It is therefore imperative that its presence and the wider implications on work, finances and overall wellbeing are accounted for. Though health concerns amongst young people in the city both precede and succeed the pandemic, it was the impact of Covid-19 on the health and lives of young people that first brought the issue into focus for this research:

I never got Covid, not that I know of. Then again, my partner did. I was worried about her actually. She got really sick, to the point she almost ended up in hospital. I didn't know this at the time, but it, the virus, could go to your stomach. It wasn't her chest or anything, but she couldn't keep anything down at all. Our own GP was useless, so I rang 111 and they got her sorted eventually, but she was so close to going into hospital, it was scary. You don't expect someone so young to get so ill with it (Simon).

Although young people are typically amongst those least at risk of developing the most serious side effects of the Covid-19 virus, it is evident that, especially those living in areas where health inequalities and inadequate health care provisions were already an issue (see Williams, 2024), young people are not completely immune from developing the more severe outcomes, which also includes what has now been termed 'Long Covid' (NHS, 2024).

*'I had Covid 7 and a half months ago and I am still suffering from some side- affects, mostly breathing difficulties' (Ken).* The symptoms of Long Covid are wide ranging and include fatigue, shortness of breath, memory and concentration issues, heart palpitations, dizziness as well

as joint and muscle pain amongst others (NHS, 2024). Jaidka and Byrne (2024), documented their experience of navigating Long Covid, which ultimately prevented them from learning how to drive and attending university and also reduced their ability to engage in everyday activities such as sports, exercise and even reading. Thus, impacting on the everyday experiential realities of young people and further expanding the time it takes to obtain the milestones indicative of adulthood.

Recent research found that receiving the Covid-19 vaccine before being exposed to the virus could have potentially reduced the probability of experiencing the worst symptoms and lessened the risk of Long Covid by up to 52% (Solan, 2024). However, due to the way in which the UK government managed the pandemic, many young people were not afforded such protection. This comes as the government response was informed by an understanding that young people required the least amount of physical shielding from the virus: *'you know, they [the UK government] constantly talked about how we as an age group were less likely to be affected by the severe health implications and not likely to die from it'* (Ken). As a result, despite the first of the vaccines being rolled out in December 2020 in the UK, it was not until 8 months later, in August 2021 that most 18–29-year-olds received their first vaccination (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021).

Such decisions from the UK government and their potential for harm gave young people further reason and need to exercise intrinsically motivated special liberty as a means to protect themselves (Kotzé, 2024; Hall, 2012):

*During her interview briefing, like many participants, Stacey began to reminisce about the pandemic. Though not much time had passed since the last lockdowns, what life was like during that time had somewhat become a distant memory as life had seemingly returned to pre-pandemic norms. One thing Stacey discussed in particular stood out to me, and that was her thoughts on the Covid-19 vaccine. Stacey mentioned that, although she was initially apprehensive about the early roll-out of the vaccine, she was pleased that they had allowed life to somewhat 'get back to normal'. Stacey also mentioned how the*

*vaccines had released some of the anxieties around leaving the house to do everyday tasks like shopping and exercising. This led to Stacey to recount how her partner was disgruntled by the government decision to leave young people until the end of the roll-out. Stacey informed me of how they had even considered lying to be able to get the vaccination earlier as, though her partner worked throughout the pandemic and Stacey returned to work at various points, they were not considered a priority to receive the vaccination. Despite stressing that she understood the importance of those who were more vulnerable receiving the vaccination first, Stacey and her partner felt that they needed to protect their family and could do so by pretending to be vulnerable to 'jump the vaccine queue'.*

The absence of representation and protection during the pandemic as the UK government failed to recognise the needs of young people, led to many of them feeling like they needed to take their personal protection into their own hands, even if it meant risking harm to others. This is especially true for young people living in deprived areas like Stoke-on-Trent where more severe health outcomes of the virus and wider socioeconomic impacts of such were almost inevitable.

This protective behaviour demonstrated by individuals, however, also came in the form of stigmatising those with preexisting medical conditions during the pandemic:

During that time people were constantly on edge, so any cough or anything like that, people would stare at you when out. But what people don't realise, anything can impact your asthma, even a change in the weather. With my asthma, I was exempt from wearing a mask. Even though it made my asthma worse, I wore one when out as you don't know what would happen. They might not let you in the shop, or you do not know how people would react to you (Eddie).

This was arguably an unintended consequence of the fear tactics used by the UK government to enforce rules and regulations, which were discussed in-depth earlier in this chapter. The presence of growing fear, the reassertion that following the rules was the only way to end the lockdowns and a culture of reporting and holding people accountable when they did not adhere to these rules to an acceptable standard arguably led to individuals becoming less tolerable and less understanding of those around them:

lockdown made me realise I hate being around people more than I originally thought. The selfishness, going out without a mask, not washing their hands, not staying in when ill. It made me like socialising even less (Ken).

The fear surrounding the virus also meant that those with chronic respiratory issues like asthma also faced increased difficulties accessing adequate health care:

Well, I have asthma [...]. The doctors were kinda like, they wouldn't really see you if you had like a cough or anything. Like with asthma, you cough, and you can't really breathe properly. So, the doctors were a bit like, well I aren't going to see you if you come in with all that because you might have Covid. So that was like a little bit of a concern really (Eddie).

As the spread of the Covid-19 virus became the main concern and even health care professionals became wary of those demonstrating signs of respiratory issues, many providers rationed in-clinic responses, reducing face-to-face appointments for routine and non-urgent health checks: *'I normally have asthma checks but during covid they were over the phone, so that was hard. It was difficult for me and the doctors to really see how my asthma was'* (Eddie). This move to online and over the phone appointments came despite healthcare provisions being unequipped with the skills or the technology to provide adequate remote medical care (Asthma and Lung UK, 2022).

It was not just those with asthma however, that faced issues accessing necessary and adequate medical interventions for health concerns unrelated to the virus, including maternity care. As mentioned previously, the maternity care in Stoke-on-Trent is considered to be less than adequate, with the highest rate of infant deaths across England being a key indicator (Director of Public Health, 2023). Further challenges and inequalities were experienced by young people giving birth during the pandemic as health services came under increased pressure and measures to prevent the spread of the virus meant that accessing adequate provisions became even more difficult:

I was lucky to be the one who was pregnant, my partner, he missed out on a lot. He couldn't come to most of my appointments, to my blood test, to appointments to hear about how the baby is doing. [...]. Other than a couple of appointments, I never had any contact with anyone much at all. Because I had no support from the hospital, I worried a lot, even though I tried not to. I went to the hospital one day, I think December. I was stressing out because I hadn't felt him move for a while. They said he was a bit stretched for space and things like that, but I don't think they seemed that bothered. I understand they see worried parents all the time and it's probably nothing. But I was worried, and they didn't seem to care. It was my first baby, of course I was worried, I didn't know what to expect. [...] I went up the hospital after they told me to come in on the phone. After I finally got a bed, my partner needed to leave to put more money on the parking. Because of Covid they told him if he left, he wasn't allowed to come back in. He didn't leave but we were worried we would get a fine or something, which added unneeded stress (Nancy).

Lockdown measures meant that the support needed from both health professionals as family and friends were restricted, which for some, continued to be an issue after giving birth:

My partner wasn't allowed much time with my son when he finally got here. I think he had to go after like two hours. I was shattered, I'd been in labour for 22 hours and hadn't had much sleep. I really wanted to be at home, and I didn't want to be on my own in the hospital, looking after a new-born. I had to have stitches, so they wanted to keep me in to keep an eye on me. It was hard on my own, but I tried, even though I was in pain, I tried to force myself to like get up, change his nappy, feed him, even get up for just a cuddle. But I shouldn't have had to have done all that on my own. I tried telling them that I wanted to go home so baby's dad could help with these things, but they wouldn't let me (Nancy).

These conditions amplified the challenges already faced by parents, especially first-time mothers (Gray and Barnett, 2022) and potentially had lasting impacts on the experiential realities of young parents as reduced support networks increased the risk of mental ill-health amongst those who gave birth during the pandemic (Filippetti, Clarke and Rigato, 2022).

Maternity care is not the only way in which women's long-term health was impacted by the pandemic and wider health disparities present within Stoke-on-Trent:

Oh jeez, don't talk to me about the health care system. I have endometriosis. It took years to get a diagnosis, lots of long waitlists and dead ends with the doctors, especially during the pandemic. You could never get in to see an actual doctor, and when you do I feel like they don't really listen. It was never-ending to get the help I needed. I went private for some of my care, just to speed things up a bit [...] I could not really afford to go private, but I had no choice, I'd rather take the debt than continue with the pain (Emma).

Research conducted by Endometriosis UK (2022) indicates that women in the UK faced further health care disparities during the pandemic as numerous gynaecology appointments were cancelled and wait times increased significantly (see also Lewin *et al.*, 2023). As a result, many people, not just women, turned to private healthcare to ensure their medical needs were met (Keith *et al.*, 2024). It must be noted however, as a result of the cost, privately funded healthcare provisions were likely not an option for most young people living in areas like Stoke-on-Trent, with private healthcare being more attainable to those living in more affluent areas in the UK (Devaja, 2023).

On the topic of access, in more affluent areas where inequalities are less prevalent, access to NHS funded health care also appears to be more easily attainable:

No, in Oxford I feel the healthcare system is better, a lot less of a battle getting in anyway. In fact, I know they shouldn't, but my grandparents are still registered at their old doctors down south as they know how bad the healthcare is up here. The waitlists aren't as long, it's easier to see their doctor. Here, it can take weeks, if not months to see someone to get some actual help (Emma).

These notable difficulties in accessing adequate health care seen in this chapter have a clear impact on the experiential realities of young people and their overall quality of life. This also brings back into question the issue of sacrificial violence (see Briggs *et al.*, 2021; Ellis *et al.*, 2021). Not only are the health of those in deprived areas like Stoke-on-Trent sacrificed at the helm of neoliberal economic agendas that prioritise profit and privatization over adequate healthcare and wider welfare provisions, but as seen throughout, the health and wellbeing of young people are also further compromised as their age often places them as a lesser priority: *'I would say it was mostly because of my age, you aren't classed as in vulnerable category are you, even outside the pandemic'* (Eddie). This difficulty accessing prompt healthcare is true even when serious, potentially life-threatening conditions like cancer are involved:

I also had a cancer scare. I had a new mole on my hand that I was concerned about. I rang the doctors, and they told me it was nothing to worry about, and that they wouldn't even look at pictures of it. I was still concerned a few weeks later, I rang back and sent pictures. They finally took a look at it and told me that there could actually be something of concern, but they weren't sure, so they referred me to the hospital. It took three months in total from first ringing the doctors before getting the results back (Ken).

Thus, demonstrating the extreme consequences these systemic harms and sacrifices can have on the health of young people.

This chapter started by discussing the mental and physical health inequalities in Stoke-on-Trent that are a byproduct of the systemic harms created by the deep structures of neoliberalism and how these health inequalities have been increased as a result of the UK government response to the pandemic. This chapter has also touched on how these circumstances can lead to harm at an individual level as young people in the city act in ways that risk harm to others to protect themselves and their intrinsic interests (Hall, 2012; Kotzé, 2025). What it is yet to do, at least in any real depth, is examine the way in which culture and lifestyles impact on the health of young people. As transcendental materialist subjects, young people navigating the transition into adulthood embody the values and philosophies promoted by the dominant, neoliberal Symbolic Order, including notions of selfishness, competition and success. This, in addition to the absence of adequate and secure employment, which would potentially allow young people to progress, successfully achieve the milestones indicative of adulthood and attain stability (see Lloyd, 2018a; 2018b), means that many young people find themselves working longer and harder:

It was almost like a constant balancing act. Sometimes I'd think, look you are working too much, or too long hours. Like I said earlier, I was at work 8am till 6pm, but I didn't get in until like 7pm sometimes. I would feel so guilty, by time I'd be home my son was going to bed, I would barely see him or my husband. I'd be tired from the day so I'd go to bed early then next thing you know, the alarm would be going to start the day again (Heidi).

As more people are becoming fatigued and experiencing wider physical and mental health concerns, the physical impact of overarching neoliberal structures and ideologies on the body are becoming more evident (See Hall and Winlow, 2025; Bushell, 2023). To make sense of and offset the absence of protection from harm to their health and their wider experiential realities, young people further solicit the neoliberal Symbolic Order in a cycle that perhaps exposes them to even further harm, the process and effects of which will be explored in the final section of this chapter.

### **Internalisation of Health and Wellbeing- Looking Good, Feeling Good and Being Good Enough:**

*As I looked through the local newspaper, the Stoke Sentinel, I came across throwback photos of Longton town between the 1960's and 1980's. The photos showed that Longton was once filled with locals and visitors, all there to shop, socialise and visit the local Cafés and restaurants. It is hard to picture that now as the town is adorned with abandoned buildings and a distinct lack of footfall. However, one area of business that does not seem to be faltering in Longton is the beauty and wellbeing industry, with several hairdressers and beauty salons remaining open and in operation. One particular salon I walked by had a sign in the window indicating the services they offer. The usual, nails, eyebrow shaping, eyelash tinting and waxing were on the list. More surprisingly though, weight loss medications, non-surgical liposuction and body sculpting were also on offer to help people return to their 'pre-pandemic' bodies.*

Health, beauty and the ideology of wellness has become a highly profitable commodity in today's society. In 2022, the global wellness economy hit \$5.6 Trillion and is projected to be worth \$8.5 Trillion by 2027 (Global Wellness Institute, 2023). Amongst others, these figures include spa treatments, nutrition and weight loss measures, mental wellbeing services, physical activity and personal beauty and care. The latter includes expenditure on products and procedures targeted at changing one's physical appearance:

I mostly just use expensive skincare and collagen drinks aha. I have had a few cosmetic bits done, haven't we all. I've had my teeth straightened and I have my eyelashes and nails done. Bits like that. Nothing else yet, but they do say to wait until 30 for things like Botox, so not long until I will be going down that route (Emma).

This increased expenditure is a result of body alterations becoming more normalised and socially acceptable (see Barnes, 2025). This desire to change oneself could be said to arise out of the neoliberal ideology of competitiveness as people want what others have, always comparing their lifestyles, achievements and even looks with others. This is further encouraged by the beauty industry to increase sales and deepened by the medias portrayal, idealisation and conformity towards certain beauty standards (Barnes, 2025):

For us, you can scrap all that putting your make-up on cus things are more important, like buying toilet roll haha. But yeah so, I think these influencers have pushed too much on these young girls. Like you know, love island and things like that. There's no actual normal bodies on there, they are all these perfect people. You think, oh their hairs nice, their make-up is perfect, they have all this glowing skin. It's not all about that anymore, it's all this figure image being pushed too much. Especially in the lockdown because people are still doing all this make-up and they push kids to think that they need to be doing it too, when they really don't (Marie).

It is not just the media and beauty industry that are to blame, however, as they arguably tap into and capitalise on what Cederström and Spicer (2015) term the 'wellbeing syndrome'. Cederström and Spicer (2015) argue that the wellness syndrome is grounded in the neoliberal philosophy of 'bodily capital' in which, as assets, people seek to optimize themselves, their fitness and their appearance as society has come to view these as intrinsically linked to personal value, status, self-worth and productivity (see also Shilling, 1991; Bourdieu, 1978). Out of fear of judgement for being overweight, smoking, having low fitness levels, their physical appearance not adhering to normalised beauty standards or facing issues with mental health, many young people often engage in a cycle of 'self-improvement':

I think in some ways, it made my life better [lockdowns]. I could manage my life better; I had time for uni work and look after my mental health. I know that isn't the experience everyone had, I was lucky in that sense. Having the home gym helped that though. My mental health improved because I had time to work on myself (Harry).

Though the wellness syndrome does not overlook the benefits related to living generally healthier lifestyles or the idea of being or wanting to be well, what Cederström and Spicer

(2015) do critique, however, is the cult of wellness and how societies obsession with being well and optimizing oneself can ultimately be used against individuals. When young people do not meet the impeccably high standards of physical and mental wellness set in today's society, it is not only held against them in their plight to gain higher social status and popularity amongst peers and potential partners, this discrimination and stigma also extends into the realm of employment:

You couldn't have tattoos, and I got told I wore too many earrings even though the person that told me had tattoos on his hands anyway. I was meant to have them covered up. [...] Because of their clientele being older people that go in there. To them obviously older people are a certain way and look down on how people look and dress because they don't dress or look like that. I went for a supervisor position and I think because of the issues I've had with them and with obviously the way I look and wearing certain clothes they wouldn't even consider me for that position (Stacey).

As seen in the last chapter, as institutions informed by neoliberal capitalism prioritise profit over individuals (see Lloyd, 2018a), they too view workers as just another asset that they can use to enhance revenue and operations. The stigma young people face when employers perceive their bodily capital to be of little value to their institution's capitalist informed agenda, can be a barrier to their career progression. Thus, furthering the social and economic inequalities faced by young people in areas like Stoke-on-Trent (see Shilling, 1991).

Placing value on the wellness and appearance of young people also has further detriment on their overall psychological wellbeing:

There was the vest top incident haha. Obviously in the summer it was hot and we asked about different clothes to wear to be cooler. There was me and another girl she was a size 8 and small chested and I've got a large chest. We asked about wearing vest tops and we were told we could only wear the thick strap ones. We both went in to work wearing them, the other girl was allowed to wear hers whereas I was told I couldn't wear mine again because it showed my chest too much. To me, that was discriminating against the fact that I had a large chest and she didn't. It made me feel self-conscious that something was wrong with my body but not hers (Stacey).

When young people are unable to attain the very high standards set by society in that they remain unhappy and unhealthy, they are led to believe that they are to blame and that any further consequences were brought on by themselves and their inability to improve, leading to further harm to their self-esteem and mental wellbeing. This again is a result of neoliberalism and its ideology being framed in a way that protects itself from any responsibility and places blame on the individual (see Cederström and Spicer, 2015; Winlow and Hall, 2013). In assigning blame to the individual, society stops looking at the systems and structures that further allow for these harms to come into fruition. As seen throughout, there is a distinct absence of adequate mental and physical health services, a lack of protection for the health of young people that was exemplified by the pandemic and UK government response and an absence of stability and opportunities for young people that can feed into the cycle of self-doubt and self-blame under the guise of wellbeing.

## Chapter 9: Concluding Thoughts

*'Capitalism... isn't working for young people'*- Peter Thiel.

What the arch venture capitalist Peter Thiel suggests bluntly in the above statement, that contemporary youth is being harmed by the ravages of the contemporary economic system, might give us pause to think. Thiel, after all, is perhaps the greatest manifestation of a staunchly pro-market techno-libertarian, not someone commonly giving critiques of the current economic order, and yet here he was. Indeed, his further observation was, 'if you proletarianize the young people, you should not be surprised if they eventually become communist' (Ma, 2025, p.1). Of course, US concern for alternative economic models is far less apparent than what often comes from liberal social scientists, but there is some irony that, here we have a leading technocrat billionaire more receptive and aware of the potential for exclusion from the system and the insecurity this brings than some schools of social science who are staunch defenders of the contemporary economic order.

Thiel is not the only conservative who has decided that young people are getting a raw deal, that recognition seems to be steadily growing. But it has hardly ever been lost on young people who seem increasingly frustrated, unhappy, unstable and angry. In many ways then, documenting this has been the core of this thesis, and the conclusions may therefore not make for an optimistic or reassuring read. My participants have voiced continuous anxiety, frustration and insecurity at a time where they should be feeling that they are finding themselves and making their way in the world.

### **The key Considerations and Contributions of this Thesis:**

As I come to the culmination of the writing of the PhD, what it provides for and contributes to the wider field of youth research has come into a much clearer view. First of all, the

research presented here is a documentation of the contentious and neglected field of youth studies in the social sciences of today. Given the keen interest society, politics, policy makers and academia alike have in the issue surrounding youth; to describe it as a forgotten or neglected phenomenon almost feels like an oxymoron. Yet, in so many ways it is true. Though youth is, and likely will always be, a popular topic of conversation, expansive examinations of what it means to be young in the social sciences have been lost to time. As seen in chapter two, if there ever has been a collective body of qualitative, British youth studies, it arguably began in the 1950s with John Barron Mayes and continued well into the 1970s and 1980s with extensive research outputs from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies and those that followed. However, beyond that and certainly by the early 2000s, such ethnographically informed, holistic youth studies began to dwindle. If young people were not criminals or victims of crime, why did they matter? Thus, until now, forming a gap in research that examines the lives of young people who conform, which now seem to matter little. Therefore, this thesis is first and foremost a reengagement with and expansion of traditional youth studies that shines a light on what it means to be young and transition into adulthood today as governed and framed by neoliberalism.

This leads onto the second core contribution of this study. This thesis re-engages with the traditional tenants of youth studies. It recentres the voices, experiences and lived realities of young people today in Stoke-on-Trent, an area so frequently in and of itself neglected like them. In the wake of deindustrialisation and the ascent of neoliberalism, Stoke-on-Trent was and has continued to be left behind and neglected. Like many past industrial cities (see Telford, 2022), Stoke-on-Trent once relied heavily on industry, more specifically pottery manufacturing. Since the demise of industry and its replacement with a capitalist informed, service sector economy, the city has failed to find its path and place today (Jayne, 2004). This,

in addition to further neoliberal capitalist informed economic structuring that places the free market over state support and the needs of individuals, have ensured that Stoke-on-Trent has become synonymous with poverty and deprivation. Partial gentrification, exclusion and social change is further shaping and informing the experiences of young people living in the city. Much research within ultra-realism focuses on the forgotten towns and cities in the UK to demonstrate and emphasise the physical scars that deindustrialisation and the ascent of neoliberalism have left on industrial towns, however, much of it is concentrated in the North of England (see Bushell, 2023; Telford, 2022). So, to shed light on the forgotten and neglected central English cities, like Stoke-on-Trent and expand on the ethnographic networks within ultra-realism (see Hall and Winlow 2012; Treadwell, 2015), seems vital.

While the experiential realities of those who participated in this study are undoubtedly tied to specifics of time and place, perhaps the findings and observations are more generalisable and have a wider validity than simply being a study of micro experiences of young people in Stoke-on-Trent alone. As Guy Standing (2011; 2021) confers, it is not just the most deprived whose lives have come to be characterised by precarity caused by the socioeconomic structuring of the UK today. In fact, it touches the lives of those who are wealthy and educated but encounter barriers in finding stable employment, by those who are new to the UK and by youth more broadly. Research also shows us that youth more generally has become more complex and drawn out as a result of the depth of neoliberal, social, cultural and economic structures (see Hayward, 2024; Barber, 2007). Thus, the findings of this thesis are arguably, at least in places, more generalisable to the experience of youth today.

That being said, an inescapable event frames much of the research, and that is the Covid-19 pandemic and the UK government response to it. In a nod to the sentiments made in the introduction and as a reminder as to what brought this thesis into fruition in the first place.

The Covid-19 pandemic is perhaps the single most impactful event seen in more recent years. It is arguably young people that experienced the most impact to their experiential realities as a result of such societal changes during the pandemic, its lockdowns and, in the wake of those. Thus, it was vital that the effect of the pandemic on the lives of young people (from the consequences the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns on participants lives, their careers and educational attainments to the felt effects of isolation during the pandemic) were recognised and represented in this thesis.

That being said however, though the pandemic undeniably shook the daily lives of almost everyone across the globe (see Žižek, 2020), its impact can be brought into doubt when questioning whether any meaningful societal change occurred as a result. It is in this point that this thesis also expands far beyond merely examining the experiential realities of young people during the Covid-19 pandemic. With such monumental events often comes mass social change. The Two World Wars, for example, saw an increase in social values of community and collectivism and an economic restructuring that placed people and welfarism at its core. The pandemic was expected to offer a similar level of social change and perhaps even lead to the end of neoliberalism (see Briggs *et al.*, 2020). This hope seemed to hold some weight as at the start of the pandemic it was the central state that was tasked with saving people, their lives, their jobs, their financial stability, the lot. In what can only be described as a return to a Keynesian style system, the UK Government took charge, investing vast amounts of money into the health care systems and furlough schemes and leaped into action to place the UK on lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus, protect the NHS and save lives (Šumonja, 2021). As this level of state intervention had not been seen in recent times, many were quick to deduce that neoliberalism had finally come to the end of its reign. This is unsurprising as the response from the UK government seemed, at first glance, a far cry from

the traditional tenants of neoliberalism that all too often gamble the lives of young people by placing them into the hands of the free market. But did it last? No, it did not. Even before the end of the pandemic and lockdowns were in sight there were murmurs surrounding the removal of state support for those who could not work and not too long after the lockdowns ended, universal credit uplifts designed to feed young children and heat the homes of families during the pandemic were removed. It was as if the lifting of lockdown restrictions had reversed the years of damage already done by the depth of neoliberal structures that have created conditions placing many, but most expressly young people, in a position of social and economic instability and insecurity, thus, rendering them no longer in need of such provisions. So, what is different now? Despite history showing us that with such impactful events mass socioeconomic change often ensues, why is it that the pandemic did not have the same lasting effects? Why did the UK seemingly return to the old normal so quickly? The answer is perhaps twofold. First, it can be reasoned that the intentions of the UK government were misunderstood from the offset. It is true that, in a turn of events, the UK Government response appeared to resemble a people first approach that has been demonstrably long forgotten since the ascent of neoliberalism in the 1980s. How it may have appeared nonetheless, does not necessarily align with the agenda behind such provisions. The intention was always arguably to protect the capitalist economy in the long term and even strengthen the depth of neoliberal systems by way of reasserting the conditions in which many young, working-class people found themselves in prior to the pandemic (see Šumonja, 2021). As seen throughout, the pandemic and use of lockdowns ultimately increased the insecurity and uncertainty faced by young people as, neoliberalism and the capitalist free market will always take priority, no matter what exceptional conditions are present. So perhaps there was no

return to the old normal to speak of, because in that sense, nothing ever really changed in the first place.

Which leads on to the second point. Discussion and assumptions around the Covid-19 pandemic and how it had the potential to be the first real opportunity for significant social change in the last four decades also misunderstood and underestimated the depth in which neoliberalism is engrained within society. As neoliberalism brands itself as merely a tool of economic governance, it is well known to be able to offset and negate any criticisms that fall beyond this scope (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Fisher, 2009). However, as documented throughout, neoliberalism is far more than this. Not only does it oversee the structuring of the UK economy, but it also informs and governs our everyday lives from the way we think to the way we act in this world (Hart, Bevin and Lynes, 2025). So, to further answer the question as to why the pandemic did not prove to be the great social and cultural reset it was predicted to be, one must concur that it is a result of the mere presence of neoliberalism in the UK today. In other words, the 20<sup>th</sup> century UK did not have neoliberal capitalism as it stands, but what it did have was the benefit of more nuanced political representation and protection for working-class people. Thus, making mass societal change more possible, which is perhaps not a luxury afforded today (Hall and Winlow, 2022). The sheer scope that neoliberal capitalist ideology has and, as seen throughout this thesis, the harm it causes, is perhaps why even unlikely characters like Peter Thiel have come to conclude that the impact it is having on the experiential realities of young people need to be discussed.

Much of the discussion thus far has presented a comparison between the recent Covid-19 pandemic and other past events. Viewing historical narratives and occurrences with an analytical lens has its benefits. Providing this type of context can undoubtedly help identify the evolution of political, social and academic understandings of youth and justify the need

for new theoretical frameworks like ultra-realism to understand life today. Perhaps more importantly for this study, the extent to which this perspective, can be used to frame and understand why it is that youth and the experiences of young people have changed so vastly over time. Despite the many benefits, however, what I have also found is that this discussion around 'the then and the now' opens up the concept of youth, and by extension this thesis, to what is perhaps an unconstructive and unhelpful comparison. As documented in places throughout, there are generational tensions between those who grew up in the golden era of capitalism and the youth of today. On one side there are the 'boomers', many of whom believe that young people now are all 'snowflakes' and have it easier than they ever did when they were young, set against the younger generations now who believe that they can only dream of being able to build a life with the ease and the rapidity that their elders were afforded. When discussing this thesis, I too have been hit with similar comments of 'are you sure young people have it harder' or 'young people today do not know what it's like to experience hardship'. This thesis does not discredit the harms faced by those who grew up in earlier generations and, though this work draws on the experiences of past generations to demonstrate the changing nature of youth, it does not draw a conclusion as to which generation is better or worse off in their experiences as this is a mere unhelpful tautological argument that serves no real purpose. That being said, what this thesis does focus on is the present and what it means to be young from those experiencing it in the here and now, which is only ever what and how the present can be understood.

My work, therefore, undeniably provides both a critical and contemporary account and examination of what it means to be young today, voiced by the young people themselves. What is clear from their experiential realities is that the kids and young adults are not 'alright' as many may deduce. They are in reality, far from it. Young people in the UK today grow up

and transition into adulthood in a world that is characterised by insecurity and instability, that prioritises aesthetics over skills and places the free market above all else. It is a world where the state provides very little support and takes even less responsibility for individuals, placing failure to succeed on the individual themselves. It is also a time where escaping from the world has become ever more difficult as digital technologies have brought the social, work and current affairs into the home. I recognise that participants and young people more broadly would not necessarily articulate that their experiences and lives are informed by globalisation and the depth of neoliberal structures present in society today or even express that the experiences they have are harmful. As an ultra-realist, an ethnographer and social researcher, it is my role to place their experiences into context, and I have done just that.

To do this, I re-engaged with traditional British youth studies, continuing the practice of seeking to garner a holistic understanding of the experiential realities of young people from them in their own words. In working as an ethnographer, using participant and spatial observations in addition to interviews with young people, I have been able to provide a comprehensive and considered examination of their experiences and feelings, which also frame and characterise the insecure and anxious feeling they report. However, re-engaging with traditional youth studies alone was not enough. As society has shifted and, as a result, the lives of young people have changed vastly since the conception of traditional British youth studies in the 1950s and even since its last formal usage in the early 2000s, I had to update and reframe youth studies to account for contemporary life as it is informed and governed by neoliberalism today. To do so, I have drawn upon and integrated emergent theoretical perspectives, particularly zemiology and conceptions of harm, but more specifically, the emergence of ultra-realist ideas in the social sciences in its framing of youth as it stands now. By utilising a harm-based ultra-realist perspective, I account for and critically examine how

the lives of young people are governed by the depth of neoliberal systemic structures. Whilst harm-based approaches shed a light on how our experiential realities are impacted by the hidden and unintended harms of contemporary, advanced neoliberal capitalism, ultra-realism provides an ontological framework that recognises and understands how ideology governs subjectivity (Hart, Bavin and Lynes 2025). As such I am amongst the first to employ ultra-realism to youth in what I feel is a more holistic way, making the case for its application as a specific tool to create a reinvigorated and more critical youth studies that considers youth in its entirety. Additionally, this is an application of ultra-realism that is not merely framed by crime, victimisation, disadvantage, social exclusion or marginalisation, but recognises that these very phenomena are part and parcel today of the entirety and totality of all young people's experiences. To understand deviation from norms we must also explain and understand what is mainstream, conformist, and normal.

That being said and considering the contributions of this thesis and its aim to re-focus the experiential realities of young people, the only thing left for this conclusion to do is answer the question of '*what does it actually mean to be young today?*'.

### **The Characteristics of Youth and the Experiential Realities of Young People Today:**

Stoke – A Bad Place to be Young?:

Is Stoke-on-Trent a bad place to grow up and transition into adulthood? The answer to this question is complex and nuanced. In some ways the answer is yes. Those who visit and move to the city describe it and its people as friendly and welcoming. This is a result of the local nuances, culture and social structures that also seemingly offset some of the harms caused by the dominant neoliberal advanced consumer capitalist Symbolic Order. This is arguably a result of the presence of cultures and values present within Stoke-on-Trent that promote

community, collectivism and unity. There is a state of similarity existing within the city as many of its residents do not have the wealth nor the material possession to show off in grandeur performative demonstrations of success and status or engage in high levels of conspicuous consumption (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2013). This means that young people that grow up in Stoke-on-Trent are more content with the lives they lead as their standard of living is not too dissimilar to those around them, perhaps offsetting the need for competitive and often harmful comparative and competitive instincts. Thus, many young people do not feel the same pressures to succeed that are all too familiar with young people growing up in other parts of the UK. That being said, it is easy to conclude that Stoke-on-Trent offers an easier, simpler, less pressure filled life for young people as they navigate the transition into adulthood.

However, that does not mean that the lives of young people in Stoke-on-Trent are entirely free from the multifaceted harms of which many have come to characterise youth as a result of neoliberal systemic structures and philosophies. It is not only collectivism, content and unity that shape the values and culture present within the city. Stoke-on-Trent and its residents are notorious for romanticising the pottery industry and what it once had to offer those who lived in the city. As we have seen throughout, however, Stoke-on-Trent can no longer be categorised as a working-class city for working-class young people. As the city has failed to reinvent itself in the move away from industrialism to the service economy (see Telford, 2022), it no longer offers the stability and security it once afforded the people who live there. As a result, Stoke-on-Trent has become synonymous with deprivation and harm in the minds of the subjects and wider representations. Yet, the nostalgia that people have for what once was in the city (see Winlow, 2025) and the vague promise that young people can build a life for themselves within the six towns, leaves young people unable to recognise the

harms they face and make an informed decision as to stay. Thus, further placing them in a continued state of instability and insecurity.

#### Education, Work and Employment:

If I had to pinpoint the epicentre of the insecurity and instability faced by young people today, not just in Stoke-on-Trent, but more broadly, I would start with the world of work and employment. As seen throughout, the ontological insecurity felt by young people has a number of causes including the presence of competition and fear of missing out, as is encouraged by neoliberal capitalist ideologies (Lloyd 2018a). However much of it also stems from employment conditions as they are governed by neoliberalism today. To start, young people are of working age in a time when the free-market and profit are prioritised over the needs of individuals. As individual institutions embody the values of neoliberal capitalism in their everyday practices and operations, they put young employees in harm's way. This includes the use of zero-hour contracts, short notice shift modifications and ever-changing job descriptions and responsibilities as flexibility is favoured in order to meet the fluctuating demand of the service economy. In turn, this leaves young people in a state of prolonged instability and financial insecurity and unable to plan for their futures and progress in their adult lives.

The neoliberal values employed by institutions also lead to harmful encounters in the workplace, often leaving young people feeling burnt out, degraded and worthless. In a return to social structuring and power dynamics that resemble pre-modern times (see Kotkin, 2023; Neckel, 2020), organisations and institutions prioritise customers over employees, often employing a 'a customer is always right' approach. This often leads to harmful interactions between service users and providers as the former draw on these power dynamics and self-awarded special liberty (see Kotzé, 2025; Hall, 2012) to treat young employees as they see fit

and in a bid to express and achieve their own wants and desires, despite the harmful costs this may have to others. These harmful interactions, however, are not just reserved for customers and service users. As progression opportunities that offer more stability and increased financial security are hard to come by due to both wider economic structuring and organisational practices, many young people also fall victim to those willing to subject others to harm to protect the little stability they have or to put them in the running for those hard to come by promotions (see Kotzé, 2025). This, or they subject harm to those around them for the same reasoning. Though, young people often do what they are told will allow them to achieve the jobs and lives they desire (such as working hard, gaining an education), neoliberal systemic structures are largely not designed to allow for such upwards social mobility, even though that is the promise that keeps young people working longer and harder. Thus, the working lives of young people and by extension, their experiential realities more broadly are characterised by frequent harmful interactions that so often lead them into a state of status fatalism, anxiety, unease, frustration, insecurity and instability.

Health, Mental health and Ontological Security:

A core aspect of this thesis has been to engage with the voices of young people, but this is not necessarily to state that the participants recognise or articulate fully the sources of their own oppression. A key aspect of historical youth studies crafted out of social constructionist ontological and epistemological framings was to see the articulations as giving voice to resistance, and to situate the experiences of youth as a clear manifestation of this. In many ways this research is different, and comes from a very distinct and different perspective, framed as it is by ultra-realism. Notions such as resistance were little in evidence, and instead the world of today is significantly different. The once established pathways that traditional studies showed young people opting out of or resisting were so little apparent in the lives of

young people that appear in this work. What was apparent was the widespread ontological insecurity that represented the barrier to participation in a world that the majority valorised and actively solicited.

As seen in the third and final data chapter, this participation and success in the world is a burden that is placed on them. In the wake of globalisation and the free market, surely there is a world of opportunity for young people? It is theirs for the taking? Despite the notable absence of adequate healthcare provisions and lack of stable and secure employment opportunities in areas like Stoke-on-Trent as a result of neoliberal economic agendas and imperatives, the burden is placed on young people to navigate these systems and structures alone. So not in act of resistance, but in conformity to the current order, young people turn inwards to themselves in a bid to improve their own social and economic capital and increase the chances of surviving in this world. This often comes specifically and seemingly in the form of improving oneself- through looking good, feeling good and having a healthy mindset, which young people often believe aids them to 'become better'. Better workers. Better partners. Better parents. Better people. But in this, they often find themselves in cycle of notional self-improvement that in the long run, only serves more detrimental to their overall wellbeing. What if better is never in reach?

It was not only in the spheres of work or education that competitiveness came in, but in all manner of activities that were seen as liberating and rewarding. As ultra-realist criminologists argue, not everything that looks like empowerment truly is (Hall and Winlow, 2015) and while participants could talk of being empowered through owning responsibilities for their appearance, physical health, wellbeing, bodily capital and more, they spent a considerable amount of time emersed in systems, settings and activities that were narrowly conformist and yielded for them, little tangible benefit. This was not only true of the online world, but

also in how narratives are framed more generally. Leisure and recreation activities, once imagined as a liberating space, had on a deeper reading frequently become synonymous with anxiety and frustration. The common, though not always articulated realities were far more of discomfort, anxiety and frustration at the frequent experiences of emotional, symbolic and economic exploitation. And the most insidious part? That could happen with participant's apparent or seeming consent or lack of knowledge. Or so some might think.

Yet we live within a now emotional economic logic where the more you expose yourself, the more you can supposedly be rewarded. But the reality is far from that.

### **Final Thoughts:**

*'The things we surrender to when we're young, we keep surrendering to the rest of our lives'-*

Anthony Breznican.

While the likes of Thiel and other contemporary political leaders (and indeed social scientists for that matter) seem slow to recognise it, and have found little to counter it, the experience of youth today is complex, challenging and drawn out. Youth and the journey to increased independence seems to be characterised by 'absence', absence of security, stability and protection. That lack is also one of a recognition. A lack of recognition that there is the absence of an effective Symbolic Order, which is causative (see Lloyd, 2018a). The depth structures of neoliberalism, as I term them, and the existence of an unchallenged neoliberalism as a wholesale system must be understood as causative in its entirety.

So, what does this mean, in real life, for young people entering adulthood today? In a similar style of conclusion that this study has come to, Simon Winlow suggests that there is little positive that can be said about the present, and even less about the future:

Our economies will become increasingly monopolistic and oligopolistic, manipulated by algorithms and technological surveillance and managed by new AI systems. The working class will morph into a servant class reliant upon either the crumbs that fall from super-elite's table or upon unstable and poorly remunerated gig work providing services to the trimmed down urban professional classes who administer our institutions in the interests of elite (Winlow, 2025, p.153).

It is now a world where the transitory period into adulthood (and life more generally) is a precarious one. It is not just precarious for young people from traditional working-class, deprived areas however, as many people from all backgrounds now fall victim to the unstable and insecure economic and employment conditions of today (See Standing, 2021; 2014). As this thesis has come to its end, the world has been taken by storm by AI, something that was barely a point of public discussion at the start of this journey just six years ago is now widely accessible. AI has had a notable impact with job losses and economic displacement already being attributed to its development and increasing popularity (See, Hart, Bavin and Lynes, 2025). With this comes shifts in both working and social conditions as structures within these spheres have begun to resemble pre-modern power dynamics. In what appears to be a turn to a new form of feudalism, the minority cultural and social elites, such as tech moguls, hoard a significant amount of wealth whilst the middle-class declines (see Kotkin, 2023). What is left behind for our youth of today is a fight. A fight for jobs that offer little in the way of security. A fight to have their needs seen and met during a representation crisis. A fight for survival in a world where no one is coming to rescue them. The new normal for young people is that of insecurity, instability and an absence of visibility and voice in the political, social and economic spheres.

The physical scars of neoliberalism are there to be seen, if we decide to look at them and see them. In Burslem and Bentilee it is there in the broken down and rundown residential buildings. In Hanley it is there in the street homelessness, the litter and decay, the fast food

shops, closed down retail establishments. It is ever there in the lives of my participants, the anxiety, insecurity, and uncertainty that they sometimes give voice to, and sometimes, occasionally understand the roots of. They are deeper than the obvious signs like the high youth crime, the unemployment and heightened levels of children looked after in care, they are there as much in the places and spaces that we do not look, the Goods Yard and the developing spaces such as new student villages and a redeveloped train station. The signs are all there when one looks, asks and questions. The absence of security and transition to adulthood for young people and the placing of responsibility for this onto them as individuals' is there, if we wish to seek it out. Here in this work, I have sought to do just that. Perhaps, what it means to be young today is just to be perennially precarious. Yet, it feels right in some ways to not end this thesis with my own words, but with the words of a participant, where the sources of oppression do break through:

Urm, I think young people are fucked anyways in all fairness. If you look at fucking social interaction and urm the breakdown of social relationships, that was happening before the pandemic, and the pandemic has just made it ten times fucking worse. They were always going to be fucked (Paul).

## Reference List

- Ackers, G. (2023) *Women, Men and Deindustrialisation: An Intergenerational study of Trade Workers from Naval Repair Families in the South of England*. Available at:  
<https://researchportal.port.ac.uk/en/projects/women-men-and-deindustrialisation-an-intergenerational-study-of-t/#:~:text=Literature%20on%20deindustrialisation%20does%20understand,workers%20out%20of%20the%20discourse> (Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> November 2025)
- Adams, A., Adams, Z. and Prassl, J. (2019) 'Legitimizing Precarity: Zero Hours Contracts in the United Kingdom', In M. O'Sullivan, J. Lavelle, P. Gunnigle, J. McMahon, L. Ryan, C. Murphy and T. Turner (eds.) *Zero Hours and On-call Work in Anglo-Saxon Countries*. Singapore: Springer Singapore. Pp. 41-65.
- Allen, M. (2017) *The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Communication Research Methods*. California: SAGE Publications.
- Angus, C., Henney, M. and Pryce, R. (2024) 'Modelling the Longer-Term Health and Health Inequality Impacts of Changes in Alcohol Consumption During the COVID-19 Pandemic in England', *Journal of Public Health*, 46(2), pp.286-293.
- Antonucci, L. (2018) 'Not all Experiences of Precarious Work Lead to Precarity: The Case Study of Young People at University and Their Welfare Mixes', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 21(7), pp. 888–904
- Appelbaum, E. (2012) 'Reducing inequality and insecurity: Rethinking Labor and Employment Policy for the 21st Century', *Work and Occupations*, 39(4). Available at:  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0730888412444883>

- Archibald, M.M., Ambagtsheer, R.C., Casey, M.G. and Lawless, M. (2019) 'Using zoom videoconferencing for qualitative data collection: perceptions and experiences of researchers and participants', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18, p.1609406919874596. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919874596>.
- Ariès, P. (1965) *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- Aristovnik, A., Karampelas, K., Umek, L. and Ravšelj, D. (2023) 'Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Online Learning in Higher Education: A Bibliometric Analysis', *Frontiers in Education*, 8, p. 1225834. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1225834>.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000) 'Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties', *American Psychologist*, 55(5), pp. 469–480.
- Arnett, J. J. (2004) *Emerging adulthood: The winding road from the late teens through the twenties*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Arnett, J. J. (2006a) 'G. Stanley Hall's Adolescence: Brilliance and nonsense', *History of Psychology*, 9(3), pp. 186-197
- Arnett, J.J. (2006b) 'Emerging Adulthood: Understanding the New Way of Coming of Age' in J.J. Arnett and J.L. Tanner (eds.) *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*. Washington: American Psychological Association. Pp.3–19.
- Arnett, J.J. (1998) 'Learning to stand alone: The Contemporary American Transition to Adulthood in Cultural and Historical Context', *Human Development*, 41(5-6), pp.295-315.

- Arnett, J.J. (2007) 'Emerging Adulthood: What is it, and What is it Good For?', *Child development perspectives*, 1(2), pp.68-73.
- Arnett, J.J. Žukauskienė, R. and Sugimura, K. (2014) 'The New Life Stage of Emerging Adulthood at Ages 18–29 Years: Implications for Mental Health', *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 1(7), pp.569-576.
- Asthma and Lung UK (2020) *Asthma Care in a Crisis: Annual Asthma Survey 2020*. Available at: [https://www.asthmaandlung.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-03/aas-2020\\_2a-1.pdf](https://www.asthmaandlung.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-03/aas-2020_2a-1.pdf). (Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2025).
- Atkinson, P., Delamont S., and Coffey, A. (2007) *Handbook of Ethnography*. London: Sage Publications.
- Ault, R. and Parker, H. (2025) 'Stoke-on-Trent one of the most Dangerous Places to Live - Check our Crime Map', StokeonTrentLive (The Stoke Sentinel), 24 July. Available: <https://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/news/stoke-on-trent-news/stoke-trent-one-most-dangerous-10373062>. (Accessed: 10<sup>th</sup> November 2025).
- Bailey, S. (2000) *More Memories of Stoke on Trent*. Halifax: True North.
- Baker, C. and Kirk-Wade, E. (2024) *Mental Health Statistics: Prevalence, Services and Funding in England*. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn06988/> (Accessed: 11th November 2025).
- Baker, S.E. and Edwards, R. (2012) *How Many Qualitative Interviews is Enough*. Available at: [https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/2273/4/how\\_many\\_interviews.pdf](https://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/id/eprint/2273/4/how_many_interviews.pdf) (Accessed: 21<sup>st</sup> April 2023).

- Bal, P.M. and Dóci, E. (2018) 'Neoliberal Ideology in Work and Organizational Psychology', *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 27(5), pp.536-548.
- Barber, B.R. (2008) *Consumed: How Markets Corrupt Children, Infantilize Adults and Swallow Citizens Whole*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company
- Barnes, S. (2025) *The Harms of Beauty*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Bateman, T. (2020) 'Unjust pains: the impact of COVID-19 on children in prison', *Journal of Children's Services*, 15(4), pp.201-208.
- Baudrillard, J. (1981) *Simulacra and Simulation*. Paris: Éditions Galilée
- Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Braithwaite, C. Hodgkinson, O., Treadwell, T. (2025) 'Mentoring Moments: A Collaborative Reflection on Supervision' in S. Jones, M. Azad, L. Miles and A. Lynes (eds.) *Embracing the Unknown: Experiences of Studying for a PhD in the Social Sciences*. Bristol: Bristol Policy Press. Pp. 210-221.
- Bebbie, E. (2008) *The Basics of Social Research*. 4th edn. Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Bell, D. (1973) *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society: A Venture in Social Forecasting*. New York: Basic Books
- Benanav, A. (2021) 'Service Work in the Pandemic Economy', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 99, pp.66-74.
- Bennett, A. (1902) *Anna of the Five Towns*. London: Chatto and Windus.

- Bessant, J. (2008) 'Hard wired for risk: Neurological science, 'The Adolescent Brain' and Developmental Theory', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 11(3), pp.347-360.
- Bhaskar, R. (1997) 'On the Ontological Status of Ideas', *Journal for the theory of social behaviour*, 27(2-3), pp.139-147.
- Bhaskar, R. (2009) *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*. Routledge. London.
- Bhaskar, R. (2010) *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy*. London: Routledge.
- Bhat, M.A. (2016) 'From the Chicago School to Post-sub Cultural Carriage: A Review and Analysis of Contemporary Trends in Youth Culture Research', *Journal of Social Sciences*, 12(1), pp.78-87.
- Bilal, Mohammed Al-Matari, E., Khan, S., Ahmed Mareai Senan, N., Abbas, A. and Manzoor, S. (2022) 'Impact of Fear of COVID-19 Pandemic on Job Insecurity and Subjective Well-being' *The Journal of Health Care Organization, Provision, and Financing*, 59, p.00469580221102695. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0046958022110269>.
- Bishop V, Hoel H (2008) 'The Customer is Always Right? Exploring the Concept of Customer Bullying in the British Employment Service', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8(3) pp. 341–367.
- Blundell, R., Costa Dias, M., Joyce, R. and Xu, X. (2020) 'COVID-19 and Inequalities', *Fiscal Studies*, 41(2), pp.291-319.
- BMA (2025) *Mental Health Pressures in England*. Available at: <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and->

[workforce/pressures/mental-health-pressures-data-analysis](#) (Accessed: 19th September 2025).

Bokhove, C. and Downey, C. (2018), 'Automated Generation of 'Good Enough' Transcripts as a First Step to Transcription of Audio-Recorded Data', *Methodological Innovations*, 11(2), p.2059799118790743. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059799118790743>.

Booyens, I., Hadjisolomou, A., Nickson, D., Cunningham, T. and Baum, T. (2022) 'It's Not a Big Deal': Customer Misbehaviour and Social Washing in Hospitality', *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 34(11), pp.4123-4141.

Boulki, A. and Kotzé, J. (2018) *Zemiology: Reconnecting Crime and Social Harm*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bourdieu, P. (1978) 'Sport and Social Class', *Social Science Information*, 17(6), pp.819-840.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp.77-101.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021a) 'One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic analysis?', *Qualitative research in Psychology*, 18(3), pp.328-352.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021b) 'Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing Reflexive Thematic Analysis and other Pattern-Based Qualitative Analytic Approaches', *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 21(1), pp.37-47.

Bresser-Pereira, L.C. (2020) 'New Developmentalism: development macroeconomics for middle-income countries', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 44(3), pp.629-646.

- Brewer, J. (2000) *Ethnography*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Briggs, D., Ellis, A., Lloyd, A. and Telford, L. (2020) 'New hope or old futures in disguise? Neoliberalism, the Covid-19 pandemic and the possibility for social change', *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 40(9), pp.831-848.
- Briggs, D., Telford, L., Ellis, A., Lloyd, A. and Kotzé, J. (2021) *Lockdown: Social Harm in the Covid-19 Era*. Berlin: Springer Nature.
- Briggs, J.Y.H. (1993) 'The Development of Industrial Specialisation' in A. Phillips (ed.) *The Potteries: Continuity and Change in a Staffordshire Conurbation*. Stroud: Alan Sutton. Pp 94–106.
- British Retail Consortium (2025) *BRC Retail Crime Survey 2025*. Available at: <https://brc.org.uk/news-and-events/news/operations/2025/ungated/brc-retail-crime-survey-2025/> (Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2025).
- Brown, J., Kirk-Wade, E. (2022) *Coronavirus: A History of Lockdowns in England*. 9068. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9068/CBP-9068.pdf>. (Accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> November 2025).
- Bryman, A. (2016) *Social Research Methods*. 5<sup>th</sup> edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bryson, J. (2013) 'The Nature of Gentrification', *Geography Compass*, 7(8), pp.578-587.
- Bucholtz, M. (2000) 'The Politics of Transcription', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 32(10), pp. 1439–1465
- Bushell, M. and Braithwaite, C. (2024) 'Barbarians at the Tills? Post-Pandemic Reflections on Violence and Abuse Against Workers in the Retail Industry', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 24(4), pp.441-458.

Bushell, M.G. (2023) 'No Time for Rest: An Exploration of Sleep and Social Harm in the North East Night-Time Economy (NTE)', *Critical Criminology*, 31(1), pp.145-160.

Byrom, N. (2020) 'The Challenges of Lockdown for Early-Career Researchers', *eLife Sciences*.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.59634>

Campbell, B. (1993) *Goliath: Britain's Dangerous Places*. Malton: Methuen Publishing Ltd

Canning, V. (2020) 'Corrosive Control: State-Corporate and Gendered Harm in Bordered Britain', *Critical Criminology*, 28(2), pp.259-275.

Canning, V. and Tombs, S. (2021) *From Social Harm to Zemiology: A Critical Introduction*.

London: Routledge.

Case, S. (2018) *Youth Justice: A Critical Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Castilla, E.J. and Benard, S. (2010) 'The Paradox of Meritocracy in

Organizations', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 55(4), pp.543-676.

Castle (2023) 'Controversial Poll Ranks Stoke-on-Trent among 'worst places to live in UK',

StokeonTrentLive (The Stoke Sentinel), 7 February. Available at:

<https://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/news/stoke-on-trent-news/controversial-poll-ranks-stoke-trent-8120989> (Accessed: 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2025).

Cederström, C. and Spicer, A. (2015) *The Wellness Syndrome*. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons.

Cepa, K. and Furstenberg, F.F. (2021) 'Reaching adulthood: Persistent beliefs about the importance and timing of adult milestones', *Journal of Family Issues*, 42(1), pp.27-57.

Channing, I., Churchill, D. and Yeomans, H. (2023) 'Renewing historical criminology: Scope, significance, and future directions', *Annual Review of Criminology*, 6(1), pp.339-361.

Choy, L.T. (2014) 'The Strengths and Weaknesses of Research Methodology: Comparison and Complimentary Between Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches', *Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 19(4), pp.99-104.

Chudacoff, H.P. (1989) *How Old Are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press

City of Stoke-on-Trent (2024a) *Levelling up Stoke-on-Trent*. Available at:

[https://www.stoke.gov.uk/info/20012/business/447/levelling\\_up\\_stoke-on-trent](https://www.stoke.gov.uk/info/20012/business/447/levelling_up_stoke-on-trent)

(Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

City of Stoke-on-Trent (2024b) *Goods Yard Hits Targets to Boost Local Economy Weeks ahead of Opening*. Available at:

[https://www.stoke.gov.uk/news/article/1694/goods\\_yard\\_hits\\_targets\\_to\\_boost\\_local\\_economy\\_weeks\\_ahead\\_of\\_opening#:~:text=We'll%20also%20see%20many,support%20within%20the%20local%20area.%E2%80%9D](https://www.stoke.gov.uk/news/article/1694/goods_yard_hits_targets_to_boost_local_economy_weeks_ahead_of_opening#:~:text=We'll%20also%20see%20many,support%20within%20the%20local%20area.%E2%80%9D) (Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November

2025).

City of Stoke-on-Trent (2024c) *Economic Development Strategy 2024-28*. Available at:

[https://www.stoke.gov.uk/info/20003/your\\_council\\_your\\_city/735/economic\\_development\\_strategy](https://www.stoke.gov.uk/info/20003/your_council_your_city/735/economic_development_strategy) (Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> May 2026).

City of Stoke-on-Trent (2025) *Stoke-on-Trent Centenary: Celebrating 100 years of our City*.

Available at: <https://sot100.org.uk/> (Accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

Clarke, J., McIvor, A., McEwan, A. and Burns, S. (2024) 'Gender and Deindustrialization: A Transnational Historiographical Review', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 105, pp.85-103.

Clement, M. and Mennell, S. (2022) 'Elias, Ultra-Realism and Double-Binds: Violence in the Streets and the State', *European Journal of Criminology*, 19(6), pp.1367-1385.

Committee of Public Accounts (2025) NHS Financial Sustainability. Available at:

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/46303/documents/233234/default/>

(Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

Connell, K. and Hilton, M. (2015) 'The working practices of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary cultural Studies', *Social History*, 40(3), pp. 20287-20311.

Cook, P.J. and Frank, R.H. (2010) *The Winner-Take-all Society: Why the Few at the Top Get so Much More than the Rest of Us*. New York: Random House.

Cunningham, S., Brione, P. and Zaidi, K. (2024) *Flexible Working* (01086). Available at:

<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN01086/SN01086.pdf>

(Accessed: 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2025).

De Villiers, C., Farooq, M.B. and Molinari, M. (2021) 'Qualitative research interviews using online video technology—challenges and opportunities', *Meditari Accountancy Research*, 30(6), pp.1764-1782.

Dean, J. (2017) *Doing Reflexivity: An Introduction*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Dean, J., Furness, P., Verrier, D. (2018) 'Desert Island data: An Investigation into Researcher Positionality', *Qualitative Research* 18(3), pp. 273–289.

Dedryver, C.C. and Knai, C. (2021) 'It's Easily the Lowest I've Ever, Ever Got To': A Qualitative Study of Young Adults' Social Isolation During the COVID-19 Lockdowns in the UK', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(22), p.11777. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph182211777>.

Deeptee, P.R. and Roshan, B. (2009) 'Signalling Power of Dividend on Firms' Future Profits a Literature Review', *International Interdisciplinary Journal*, 1(1), pp.1-9.

DeMause, L. (1974) 'The Evolution of Childhood', *The History of Childhood*, 1(4), pp.1-74.

Dennis, D., McGlinchey, E. and Wheaton, M.G. (2023) 'The Perceived Long-Term Impact of COVID-19 on OCD Symptomology', *Journal of Obsessive-Compulsive and Related Disorders*, 38, p.100812. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jocrd.2023.100812>

Denscombe, M. (2014) *Good Research Guide for Small-Scale Social Research Projects*. 5th ed. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Department and of Health and Social Care (2021) *UK Moves into Next Phase of Vaccine Roll-Out as Government Target Hit Early*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-moves-into-next-phase-of-vaccine-roll-out-as-government-target-hit-early> (Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

Department for Business and Trade (2025) *Consultation on the Application of Zero-Hours Contracts Measures to Agency Workers*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/making-work-pay-the-application-of-zero-hours-contracts-measures-to-agency-workers/consultation-on-the-application-of-zero-hours-contracts-measures-to-agency-workers-web-accessible-version> (Accessed: 10<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

Department for Work and Pensions (2025) *Benefit and pension rates 2025 to 2026*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/benefit-and-pension-rates-2025-to-2026/benefit-and-pension-rates-2025-to-2026> (Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

Dettling, L. (2016) *Effects of Entering Adulthood During a Recession*. Available at: <https://wol.iza.org/articles/effects-of-entering-adulthood-during-recession/long> (Accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> June 2022)

Devaja, A. (2023) 'Health Inequalities: The Unintended Consequences of Private Healthcare Policy?', *The Bulletin of the Royal College of Surgeons of England*, 105(6), pp.272-273.

Director of Public Health (2023) *Stoke-on-Trent DPH Annual Report 2023*. Available at: [https://www.stoke.gov.uk/directory\\_record/335170/director\\_of\\_public\\_health\\_annual\\_report\\_2023](https://www.stoke.gov.uk/directory_record/335170/director_of_public_health_annual_report_2023) (Accessed: 3rd June 2024).

Director of Public Health (2024) *Stoke-on-Trent DPH Annual Report 2024*. Available at: [https://www.stoke.gov.uk/directory\\_record/335215/director\\_of\\_public\\_health\\_annual\\_report](https://www.stoke.gov.uk/directory_record/335215/director_of_public_health_annual_report) (Accessed: 10<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

Dodsworth, L. (2021) *A State of Fear: How the UK Government Weaponised Fear During the Covid-19 Pandemic*. UK: Pinter and Martin.

Duggan, L. (2012) *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Edensor, T. (2001) *Reclaiming Stoke-On-Trent: Leisure, Space and Identity in the Potteries*. Staffordshire: Staffordshire University Press.

*Education Act 1880* (c.29) Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/43-44/23/enacted>

Edwards, R. and Holland, J. (2013) *What is Qualitative Interviewing?*. London A&C Black.

Eisner, M. (2003) 'The long-term Development of Violence: Empirical Findings and Theoretical Approaches to Interpretation' in W. Heitmeyer, and J. Hagan *International Handbook of Violence Research*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. Pp. 41-59.

Elder, G.H. (1975) 'Age differentiation and the Life Course', *Annual review of sociology*, 1, pp.165-190.

Elias, 2007 [1983] *The Court Society*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Elias, N (1994) [1939] *The Civilising Process*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Ellis, A. (2015) *Men, Masculinities and Violence: An Ethnographic Study*. London: Routledge.

Ellis, A. (2019) 'A De-civilizing Reversal or System Normal? Rising Lethal Violence in Post-Recession Austerity United Kingdom', *The British Journal of Criminology*, 59(4), pp.862-878.

Ellis, A. (2022) 'Tick, Tock, Boom! A critical Forecast on Violence in Post-Pandemic UK', *Journal of Contemporary Crime, Harm, and Ethics*, 2(1), pp.24-41.

Ellis, A., Telford, L., Lloyd, A. and Briggs, D. (2021) 'For the Greater Good: Sacrificial Violence and the Coronavirus Pandemic', *Journal of Contemporary Crime, Harm, and Ethics*, 1(1), pp.1-22.

Emery, J. (2019) 'Geographies of Deindustrialization and the Working-class: Industrial Ruination, Legacies, and Affect', *Geography Compass*, 13(2), p.e12417. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12417>.

Emmel, N., Hughes, K., Greenhalgh, J. and Sales, A. (2007) 'Accessing Socially Excluded People—Trust and the Gatekeeper in the Researcher-Participant relationship', *Sociological Research Online*, 12(2), pp.43-55.

Endometriosis UK (2022). *England: Unacceptable Care Delays for Endometriosis*. Available at: <https://www.endometriosis-uk.org/england-unacceptable-care-delays-endometriosis#:~:text=Endometriosis%20UK%20says%20%E2%80%9CMore%20action,CEO%20of%20Endometriosis%20UK%20said>. (Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

Erikson, E. H. (1950) 'Growth and Crises of the Healthy Personality' in M.J. E. Senn (ed.) *Symposium on the Healthy Personality*. New York: Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation. Pp. 91–146.

Erikson, E.H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. 7<sup>th</sup> edn. New York: WW Norton and Company.

Etherington, D., Jones, M. and Telford, L. (2022) 'COVID Crisis, Austerity and the 'Left Behind' City: Exploring Poverty and Destitution in Stoke-on-Trent', *Local Economy*, 37(8), pp.692-707.

Etherington, D., Jones, M., Harris, S. and Hubbard, S. (2021) *Post Covid-19 Crisis and its Impact on Poverty and Destitution in Stoke-on-Trent*. Available at: <https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/6937/1/Post%20Covid->

[19%20Crisis%20and%20its%20Impact%20on%20Poverty%20%26%20Destitution%20in%20Stoke-on-Trent%20-%20Final.pdf](#) (Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

Etherington, D., Jones, M., Telford, L., Harris, S. and Hubbard, S. (2023) *Families on the Brink in Stoke-on-Trent: How Austerity and the Cost-of-living is Driving Poverty and Destitution*. Available at: <https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/7621/> (Accessed: 10<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

Evans, D. (2021) 'What Price Public Health? Funding the Local Public Health System in England Post-2013' *Critical Public Health*, 31(4), pp.429-440.

Evans, G.W., Juen, B., Corral-Verdugo, V., Corraliza, J.A. and Kaiser, F.G. (2007) 'Children's Cross-Cultural Environmental Attitudes and Self-Reported Behaviors', *Children, Youth and Environments*, 17(4), pp.128-143.

*Factories and Workshop Act 1878* (c.16). Available at:

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/41-42/16/contents/enacted>

Fereday, J., and Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006) 'Demonstrating Rigor Using Thematic Analysis: A Hybrid Approach of Inductive and Deductive Coding and Theme Development', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 5, pp.80-92.

Filippetti, M.L., Clarke, A.D. and Rigato, S. (2022) 'The Mental Health Crisis of Expectant Women in the UK: Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Prenatal Mental Health, Antenatal Attachment and Social Support', *Pregnancy and Childbirth*, 22(68). Available at: ) <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12884-022-04387-7>.

Fine, G.A. and Abramson, C.M. (2020) 'Ethnography in the time of Covid-19. Vectors and the vulnerable', *Etnografia E Ricerca Qualitativa*, 13(2), pp.165-174.

- Fisher, J., Languilaire, J.C., Lawthom, R., Nieuwenhuis, R., Petts, R.J., Runswick-Cole, K. and Yerkes, M.A. (2020) 'Community, Work, and Family in Times of COVID-19', *Community, Work and Family*, 23(3), pp.247-252.
- Fisher, M. (2009) *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative?*. Alresford: Zero Books.
- Fisher, M. (2022) *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative? (New Edition)*. Winchester: John Hunt Publishing.
- Folkes, L. (2022) 'Moving Beyond 'Shopping List' Positionality: Using Kitchen Table Reflexivity and Invisible Tools to Develop Reflexive Qualitative Research', *Qualitative Research*, 0(0), pp.1-18.
- Forster Act (Forster Act) 1870*. Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/school/overview/1870educationact/>
- Frels, R.K. and Onwuegbuzie, A.J. (2012) 'Interviewing the Interpretive Researcher: An Impressionist Tale', *Qualitative Report*, 17, p.60.
- Fraser, A. (2015) *Urban Legends: Gang Identity in the Post-Industrial City*. Oxford: Clarendon
- Geddes, A., Parker, C. and Scott, S. (2018) 'When the Snowball Fails to Roll and the use of 'Horizontal' Networking in Qualitative Social Research', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 21(3), pp.347-358.
- General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR)*. 679. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/eur/2016/679/contents> (Accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> November 2025).
- Gesch-Karamanlidis, E., (2015) 'Reflecting on Novice Qualitative Interviewer Mistakes', *Qualitative Report*, 20(5), pp. 712-726.

- Gibbs, N. (2021) *Insta-muscle: Examining online and offline IPED trade and masculine body culture*. Unpublished PhD Thesis. Northumbria University.
- Gibbs, N. (2023) *The Muscle Trade: The Use and Supply of Image and Performance Enhancing Drugs*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Gold, R. (1958) 'Roles in Sociological Field Observation', *Social Forces* 36(3), pp. 217–223.
- Google Maps (2025) *Stoke-on-Trent*. Available at:  
<https://www.google.com/maps/place/Stoke-on-Trent/@53.0219392,-2.1597434,12z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m6!3m5!1s0x487a11520fae440d:0xf1cdcd2f02cae04!8m2!3d53.0033369!4d-2.1827408!16zL20vMDE3Y2pi?entry=ttu&ep=EgoyMDI1MTEyMy4xIKXMDSOASAFQAw%3D%3D> (Accessed:15<sup>th</sup> November 2025).
- Gray, A. and Barnett, J. (2022) 'Welcoming New Life Under Lockdown: Exploring the Experiences of First-Time Mothers Who Gave Birth During the COVID-19 Pandemic', *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 27(2), pp.534-552.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A. and Johnson, L. (2006) 'How Many Interviews are Enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability', *Field methods*, 18(1), pp.59-82.
- Gurney, C.M. (2023) 'Dangerous Liaisons? Applying the Social Harm Perspective to the Social Inequality, Housing and Health Trifecta During the Covid-19 Pandemic', *International Journal of Housing Policy*, 23(2), pp.232-259.
- Haddow, K. (2022) 'Lasses are Much Easier to Get on With': The Gendered Labour of a Female Ethnographer in an All-Male Group', *Qualitative Research*, 22(2), pp.313-327.

- Haidt, J. and Lukianoff, G. (2018) *The Coddling of the American Mind: How good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting up a Generation for Failure*. London: Penguin UK
- Hall, G.S. (1904) *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime*. Charleston, South Carolina: Bibliolife, LLC.
- Hall, S. (1960) 'Crosland Territory', *New Left Review*, 2(24), pp.2-3.
- Hall, S. (2000) 'Paths to Anelpis: 1: Dimorphic Violence and the Pseudo-Pacification Process', *Parallax*, 6(2), pp.36-53.
- Hall, S. (2012) *Theorizing Crime and Deviance*. London: Sage.
- Hall, S. (2014) 'The socioeconomic Function of Evil', in L. Ray and J. Kilby (eds.) *Sociological Review Monograph: Violence and Society: Towards a New Sociology*. Chichester: Wiley, pp. 13-31.
- Hall, S. (2015) 'What is Criminology About? The Study of Harm, Special Liberty and Pseudo-Pacification in Late-Capitalism's Libidinal Economy' in D. Crewe and R. Lippens (eds.) *What is Criminology About? Philosophical Reflections*. London: Routledge, pp.122- 140.
- Hall, S. (2020) 'Consumer Culture and English History's Lost Object', in S. Hall, T. Kuldova and M. Horsley (eds.) *Crime, Harm and Consumerism*. London: Routledge, pp. 21-38.
- Hall, S. and Winlow, S. (2003) 'Rehabilitating Leviathan: Reflections on the State, Economic Regulation and Violence Reduction', *Theoretical Criminology*, 7(2), pp.139-162.
- Hall, S. and Winlow, S. (2012) *New Directions in Criminological Theory*. London: Routledge.

- Hall, S. and Winlow, S. (2015) *Revitalising Criminological Theory: Towards a New Ultra-Realism*. London: Routledge.
- Hall, S. and Winlow, S. (2018) 'Ultra-realism' in W.S. DeKeseredy and M. Dragiewicz (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Critical Criminology. 2nd edn.* (eds.) London: Routledge, pp 401-405.
- Hall, S. and Winlow, S. (2025) *Revitalizing Criminological Theory: Advances in Ultra-Realism*. London: Routledge.
- Hall, S. Critcher, C , Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., Roberts, B. (1978) *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*. London: Macmillan.
- Hall, S., Jefferson, T. (1976) *Resistance Through Rituals, Youth Subcultures in Post-war Britain*. London: Harper Collins Academic
- Hall, S., Winlow, S. and Ancrum, C. (2013) *Criminal Identities and Consumer Culture: Crime, Exclusion, and the New Culture of Narcissism*. Uffculme: Willan.
- Hammersley, M. and Atkinson, P. (2007) *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*. 3rd edn. London: Routledge.
- Hart, M., Bavin, K. and Lynes, A. (2025) 'Artificial Intelligence, Capitalism, and the Logic of Harm: Toward a Critical Criminology of AI', *Critical Criminology*, 33, pp.513-532.
- Harvey, D. (2005) *Spaces of Neoliberalization: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Hayward, K. J. (2024) *Infantilised: How Our Culture Killed Adulthood*. London: Constable.

- Health and Wellbeing Board (2021). *Stoke-on-Trent Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2021-2025*. Available at:  
[https://webapps.stoke.gov.uk/uploadedfiles/Health\\_and\\_Wellbeing\\_Strategy\\_2021 - 25.pdf.pdf](https://webapps.stoke.gov.uk/uploadedfiles/Health_and_Wellbeing_Strategy_2021_-_25.pdf.pdf) (Accessed: 15th November 2025).
- Hennink, M., Hutter, I. and Bailey, A. (2020). *Qualitative Research Methods*. London: Sage.
- Hillyard, P. and Tombs, S. (2004) 'Beyond Criminology?' in P. Hillyard, S. Pantazis S. Tombs and D. Gordon (eds.) *Beyond Criminology: Taking Harm Seriously*. London: Pluto Press. Pp.10-30.
- Hillyard, P. and Tombs, S. (2017) 'Social Harm and Zemiology' in A. Liebling, S. Maruna, L. and McAra (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*. 6<sup>th</sup> edn. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.284-305.
- Hochberg, Z.E. and Konner, M. (2020) 'Emerging Adulthood, a Pre-adult Life-History stage', *Frontiers in Endocrinology*, 10, pp.918- 930.
- Hodgkinson, O (2025) *24 Hour Party People? An Ethnographic Study of Hedonism in Stoke-on-Trent's Night-Time-Economies*. PhD Thesis. Staffordshire University. Available at:  
[https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/9136/1/Owen%20Hodgkinson%20Criminology%20PhD%20Thesis%20May%202025%20270924\\_.pdf](https://eprints.staffs.ac.uk/9136/1/Owen%20Hodgkinson%20Criminology%20PhD%20Thesis%20May%202025%20270924_.pdf) (Accessed: 7<sup>th</sup> November 2025).
- Hoggart, R. (1957) *The Uses of Literacy*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.
- Hoggart, R. (2009) *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life*. London: Penguin Classics.

- Holdsworth, E. (2017) 'Researching Women's Experiences of Electronic Monitoring' in E. Wincup (ed.) *Criminological Research: Understanding Qualitative Methods*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, pp.146-156.
- Horsley, M., Kotzé, J. and Hall, S. (2015) 'The Maintenance of Orderly Disorder: Modernity, Markets and the Pseudo-Pacification Process', *Journal on European History of Law*, 6(1), pp.18-29.
- Hourani, J., Block, K., Phillimore, J., Bradby, H., Ozcurumez, S., Goodson, L. and Vaughan, C. (2021) 'Structural and Symbolic Violence exacerbates the Risks and Consequences of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence for Forced Migrant Women', *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*, 3. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3389/fhumd.2021.769611>
- Howlett, M. (2022) 'Looking at the 'field' through a Zoom lens: Methodological reflections on conducting online research during a global pandemic', *Qualitative Research*, 22(3), pp.387-402.
- Imbroscio, D. (2016) 'Urban Policy as Meritocracy: A critique', *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 38(1), pp.79-104.
- Imrie, R. (1991) 'Industrial change and local economic fragmentation: The case of Stoke-on-Trent', *Geoforum*, 22(4), pp.433-453.
- Institute for Government (2021) *Timeline of UK Government Coronavirus Lockdowns and Measures, March 2020 to December 2021*. Available at: <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-12/timeline-coronavirus-lockdown-december-2021.pdf> (Accessed: 11th November 2025).

Institute of Health Equity (2020) *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years on Executive Summary*. Available at:

[https://www.health.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/Health%20Equity%20in%20England The%20Marmot%20Review%2010%20Years %20On executive%20summary web.pdf](https://www.health.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-03/Health%20Equity%20in%20England%20The%20Marmot%20Review%2010%20Years%20On%20executive%20summary%20web.pdf) (Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

Jackson, S.E., Brown, J., Shahab, L., Steptoe, A. and Fancourt, D. (2021) 'COVID-19, Smoking and Inequalities: A study of 53 002 Adults in the UK', *Tobacco Control*, 30(e2), pp. e111-e121. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1136/tobaccocontrol-2020-055933>

Jaidka, S. and Byrne, E. (2024) 'Children and Young People with Long COVID: Overlooked and Neglected', *Child and Adolescent Health*, 8(2), pp.99-100.

Jayne, M. (2000) 'The Cultural Quarter: (Re)locating Urban Regeneration in Stoke-on-Trent- A City in Name Only?' in T. Edensor (ed.) *Reclaiming Stoke-On-Trent: Leisure, Space and Identity in the Potteries*. Staffordshire: Staffordshire University Press, pp. 19-41.

Jayne, M. (2004) 'Culture that Works? Creative Industries Development in a Working-Class City', *Capital and Class*, 28(3), pp.199-210.

Jenner, B.M. and Myers, K.C. (2019) 'Intimacy, Rapport, and Exceptional Disclosure: A Comparison of In-Person and Mediated Interview Contexts', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 22(2), pp.165-177.

Jensen, L.A. and Arnett, J.J. (2012) 'Going Global; New Pathways for Adolescence and Emerging Adults in a Changing World', *Journal of Social Issues*, 68(3), pp.473- 492.

- Jessop, B. (2004) 'From Thatcherism to New Labour: Neo-Liberalism, Workfarism and Labour-market Regulation' in H. Overbeek (ed.) *The Political Economy of European Employment*. London: Routledge, pp. 157-173.
- Johnson, B. (2020) *Prime Minister's Statement on Coronavirus (COVID-19): 23 March 2020*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-address-to-the-nation-on-coronavirus-23-march-2020#:~:text=To%20protect%20our%20NHS%20and,through%20it%20stronger%20than%20ever>. (Accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> November 2025).
- Johnston, A. (2008) *Zizek's Ontology: A Transcendental Materialist Theory of Subjectivity*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Jones, G. (2009) *Youth*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Jorgensen, D.J. (1989) *Participant Observation: A Methodology for Human Studies*. London: Sage.
- Kawulich, B.B. (2005) 'Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method', *Qualitative Social Research*, 6(2) pp.1-22.
- Keith, J., Lawless, A., Ewbank, L. and Boshari, T. (2024) *Is the Use of Privately Funded Health Care on the Rise?*. Available at: <https://www.health.org.uk/reports-and-analysis/analysis/is-the-use-of-privately-funded-health-care-on-the-rise> (Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2025)
- Kim, C.H. and Choi, Y.B. (2017) 'How Meritocracy is Defined Today?: Contemporary Aspects of Meritocracy', *Economics and Sociology*, 10(1), p.112- 121.

- Kinsey, R., Lea, J. and Young, J. (1986) *Losing the Fight Against Crime*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Kinsey, R., Lea, J. and Young, J. (1986) *Losing the fight against crime*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Klein, N. (2014) *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*. New York City: Simon and Schuster.
- Korczynski, M. and Evans, C. (2013) 'Customer Abuse to Service Workers: An Analysis of its Social Creation Within the Service Economy', *Work, Employment and Society*, 27(5), pp.768-784.
- Korobov, Neill (2018) 'Indirect Pursuits of Intimacy in Romantic Couples Everyday Conversations: A Discourse Analytic Approach', *Qualitative Social Research*, 19(2), pp 1266-1287.
- Kotkin, J. (2023) *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism: A Warning to the Global Middle Class*. New York: Encounter Books.
- Kotzé (2016) 'Analysing the 'Crime Decline': Change and Continuity in Crime and Harm'. PhD Thesis. Teesside University. Available at:  
[https://research.tees.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/17098200/PhD\\_Thesis\\_Final.pdf](https://research.tees.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/17098200/PhD_Thesis_Final.pdf)  
(Accessed: 12<sup>th</sup> November 2025).
- Kotzé (2020), 'The Commodification of Abstinence', in S. Hall, T. Kuldova and M. Horsley (eds.) *Crime, Harm and Consumerism*. London: Routledge, pp. 54 – 69.
- Kotzé, J. (2019) *The Myth of the 'Crime Decline': Exploring Change and Continuity in Crime and Harm*. London: Routledge.

- Kotzé, J. (2021) 'On Researching Harm: An Ultra-Realist Perspective' in P. Davies (ed.) *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Harm*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 117-138.
- Kotzé, J. and Lloyd, A. (2022) 'Putting Ultra-Realism to Work' in A. Lloyd and J. Kotzé (eds.) *Making Sense of Ultra-Realism*. Leeds: Emerald Publishing Limited, pp. 91-104.
- Kotzé, J. (2025) 'On special Liberty and the Motivation to Harm', *The British Journal of Criminology*, 65(2), pp.314-327.
- Koumenta, M. and Williams, M. (2019) 'An Anatomy of Zero-Hour Contracts in the UK', *Industrial Relations Journal*, 50(1), pp.20-40.
- Kumar, K. (2020) 'From Post-Industrial to Post-modern Society' in K. Kumar (ed.) *The information Society Reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 103-120.
- Kvale, S. (1996) 'The 1,000-Page Question', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 2(3), pp.275-284.
- Kynaston, D. (2008) *Austerity Britain, 1945–1951 (Vol.1)*. London: A&C Black.
- Lacan, J. (2006) *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. London: Norton.
- Lea, J. and Young, J. (1984) *What is to be Done about Law and Order?*. London: Penguin Books
- Lennard, J. (2020) 'Uncertainty and the Great Slump', *The Economic History Review*, 73(3), pp.844-867.
- Lewin, J., Saridogan, E., Byrne, D., Clark, T.J., and Vashisht, A. (2023)' Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Surgery for Severe Endometriosis in the UK: A National Database Study', *Facts, Views & Vision in ObGyn*, 14(4), p.309.

Littler, J. (2017) *Against meritocracy: Culture, Power, and Myths of Mobility*. Oxford: Taylor & Francis

Lloyd, A. (2018a). *The Harms of Work: An Ultra-Realist Account of the Service Economy*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Lloyd, A. (2018b) 'Serving up Harm: Systemic Violence, Transitions to Adulthood and the Service Economy' in P. Boulki and J. Kotzé, *Zemiology: Reconnecting Crime and Social Harm* (eds.) London: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd, pp, 245-264

Lloyd, A. (2019) 'Harm at Work: Bullying and Special Liberty in the Retail Sector', *Critical Criminology*, 28(4). Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10612-019-09445-9> (Accessed: 12th November 2025).

Local Government Association (2025) *Stoke-on-Trent City Council: Working with the Voluntary and Community Sector to Ensure Families can Thrive*. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/case-studies/stoke-trent-city-council-working-voluntary-and-community-sector-ensure-families-can-0> (Accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

Lowe, A., Norris, A.C., Farris, A.J. and Babbage, D.R. (2018) 'Quantifying thematic saturation in qualitative data analysis', *Field Methods*, 30(3), pp.191-207.

Lu, Z., Wang, S., Ling, W. and Guo, Y. (2023) 'Gig Work and Mental Health During the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Gendered Examination of Comparisons with Regular Employment and Unemployment', *Social Science and Medicine*, 337, p.116281. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.116281>.

Lyotard, J.F. (1984) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Vol. 10). Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.

- Ma, J. (2025) *Billionaire Peter Thiel Warns if you 'Proletarianize the Young People,' Don't be Surprised they end up Communist*. Available at:  
<https://fortune.com/2025/11/08/peter-thiel-millennails-socialism-capitalism-communism-boomers-mamdani/> (Accessed: 16<sup>th</sup> November 2025).
- MacDonald, R. (1997) *Youth, the 'Underclass' and Social Exclusion*. London: Routledge.
- MacDonald, R., Mason, P., Shildrick, T., Webster, C., Johnston, L. and Ridley, L. (2001) 'Snakes & ladders: in Defence of Studies of Youth Transition', *Sociological Research Online*, 5(4), pp.1-13.
- MacLeod, G. and Jones, M. (2020) 'Explaining 'Brexit Capital': Uneven Development and the Austerity State' in M. Boyle (ed.) *Brexit Geographies*. London: Routledge, pp. 15-40.
- Madfis, E. and Cohen, J. (2016) 'Critical Criminologies of the Present and Future: Left realism, Left Idealism, and What's Left in Between', *Social Justice*, pp.1-21.
- Mah, A. (2012) *Industrial ruination, community and place: Landscapes and legacies of urban decline*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Maher, L. (1997) *Sexed Work: Gender, Race and Resistance in a Brooklyn Drug Market*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Mahoney, I. and Kearon, T. (2018) 'Social Quality and Brexit in Stoke-on-Trent, England', *The International Journal of Social Quality*, 8(1), pp.1-20.
- Harding, S (2015) *The Street Casino: Survival in Violent Street Gangs*. Bristol: Policy Press
- Marsh, S.M., Rocheleau, C.M., Carbone, E.G., Hartley, D., Reichard, A.A. and Tiesman, H.M. (2022) 'Occurrences of workplace violence related to the COVID-19 pandemic, United States, March 2020 to August 2021', *International Journal of Environmental*

*Research and Public Health*, 19(21), p.14387. Available

at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192114387>.

Marshall, C., and Rossman, G. (1989) *Designing Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Martin, R. (1988) 'The Political Economy of Britain's North-South Divide', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 13(4), pp.389-418.

Matthews, R. Young, J. (1986) *Confronting Crime*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Maycock, M. (2021) 'I Do Not Appear to Have had Previous Letters'. The Potential and Pitfalls of Using a Qualitative Correspondence Method to Facilitate Insights into Life in Prison During the Covid-19 Pandemic', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940692110471>.

Mays (1954) *Growing up in the City: A Study of Juvenile Delinquency in an Urban Neighbourhood*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Mays (1963) *Crime and Social Structure*. London: Faber.

McAuley, R (2002) *Out of Sight*. Cullompton: Willian

McAuley, R. (2007) *Out of Sight: Crime, Youth and Exclusion in Modern Britain*. Devon: Willan Publishing.

McFarland, J. and Cole, M. (1988) 'An Englishman's Home is his Castle? A Response to Paul Willis's 'Unemployment: The Final Inequality'', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 9(2), pp.199-203.

- McMullin, C. (2021) 'Transcription and Qualitative Methods: Implications for Third Sector Research', *International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 34, pp.1-14.
- Mellish, T.I., Luzmore, N.J. and Shahbaz, A.A. (2020) 'Why were the UK and USA Unprepared for the COVID-19 Pandemic? The Systemic Weaknesses of Neoliberalism: A Comparison Between the UK, USA, Germany, and South Korea', *Journal of Global Faultlines*, 7(1), pp.9-45.
- Miles, L. (2024) 'Understanding violence on British university campuses through the lens of the deviant leisure perspective', *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 24(1), pp.64-81
- Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2019) The English Indices of Deprivation 2019 (IoD2019). Available at:  
[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d8e26f6ed915d5570c6cc55/IoD2019\\_9\\_Statistical\\_Release.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d8e26f6ed915d5570c6cc55/IoD2019_9_Statistical_Release.pdf) (Accessed: 25<sup>th</sup> November 2025).
- Montmagny Grenier, C. (2021) 'Costa Rican Beach Towns as Liminal Spaces: Tourism, Transgressions and the Night-time Economy', *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*, 4(2), pp.119-136.
- Mulholland, K. (2002) 'Gender, Emotional Labour and Teamworking in a Call Centre', *Personnel Review*, 31(3), pp.283-303.
- Muncie, J (2009) *Youth and Crime*. 3rd Edn. London: Sage
- Mungham, G, and Pearson, G. (1976) *Working Class Youth Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Murray, A.J. (1996) 'The Moral Politics of Hans Morgenthau', *The Review of Politics*, 58(1), pp.81-108.

Nayak, A. (2003) 'Last of the 'Real Geordies'? White Masculinities and the Subcultural Response to Deindustrialisation', *Environment and planning: Society and Space*, 21(1), pp.7-25.

Nayak, A. (2006) 'Displaced Masculinities: Chavs, Youth and Class in the Post-industrial City', *Sociology*, 40(5), pp. 813-831.

Neckel, S. (2020) 'The Refeudalization of Modern Capitalism', *Journal of Sociology*, 56(3), pp.472-486.

NHS (2021) *2021/22 Priorities and Operational Planning Guidance*. Available at:

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/B0468-nhs-operational-planning-and-contracting-guidance.pdf> (Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

NHS (2024) *Post-Covid Syndrome (Long Covid)*. Available at:

<https://www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/post-covid-syndrome-long-covid/>  
(Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

NHS (2025) *Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey: Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing,*

*England, 2023/4*. Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/adult-psychiatric-morbidity-survey/survey-of-mental-health-and-wellbeing-england-2023-24/common-mental-health-conditions>  
(Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

Nomis (2023) *Labour Market Profile - Stoke-on-Trent*. Available at:

<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157171/report.aspx> (Accessed 1st November 2025).

O'Connor, R.C., Wetherall, K., Cleare, S., McClelland, H., Melson, A.J., Niedzwiedz, C.L.,

O'Carroll, R.E., O'Connor, D.B., Platt, S., Scowcroft, E. and Watson, B. (2021) 'Mental Health and Well-Being During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Longitudinal Analyses of Adults in the UK COVID-19 Mental Health & Wellbeing study', *The British journal of psychiatry*, 218(6), pp.326-333.

O'Reilly, K. (2009) 'Inductive and Deductive' in K. O'Reilly. *Key Concepts in Ethnography* (ed) SAGE Publications Ltd, pp. 104-109

O'Sullivan, K., McGrane, A., Clark, S. and Marshall, K. (2020) 'Exploring the impact of home-schooling on the psychological wellbeing of Irish families during the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic: A qualitative study protocol', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, p.1609406920980954. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920980954>

Office for National Statistics (2021) *Graduates' Labour Market Outcomes During the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic: Occupational Switches and Skill Mismatch*. Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/graduateslabourmarketoutcomesduringthecoronaviruscovid19pandemicoccupationalswitchesandskillmismatch/2021-03-08#:~:text=In%20the%20case%20of%20government,prevalent%20as%20employment%20support%20unwinds>. (Accessed: 10<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

Office for National Statistics (2022a) *Families and the UK Labour Market, UK: 2021*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employe>

[ntandemployeetypes/articles/familiesandthelabourmarketengland/2021](#) (Accessed: 10<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

Office for National Statistics (2022b) *Economic Modelling of Forced Saving During the*

*Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic*. Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/uksectoraccounts/articles/economicmodellingofforcedsavingduringthecoronaviruscovid19pandemic/2022-06-06>

(Accessed: 11th November 2025).

Office for National Statistics (2023) *Employment, Unemployment and Economic Inactivity in*

*Stoke-on-Trent*. Available

at:<https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/labourmarketlocal/E06000021/> (Accessed:

11th November 2025).

Papagiannaki, E., Giraleas, D. and Thanassoulis, E. (2021) 'Unpaid Overtime: Measuring its

Contribution to the UK Industries: Output (13)', *Centre for Applied Finance and*

*Economics (CAFÉ)*, (13), pp.1-39.

Parker, C., Scott, S. and Geddes, A. (2019) 'Snowball Sampling', *SAGE Research Methods*

*Foundations*. Available at: doi:[10.4135/9781526421036831710](https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526421036831710)

Parker, H.J. (1974) *View from the Boys: Sociology of Downtown Adolescents*. Exeter: David

and Charles.

Pemberton, S. (2015) *Harmful Societies: Understanding social harm*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Pennington, E. (2025) 'Gender, Paid Employment, and Deindustrialization in New Towns in

North-West England, c. 1970–1990s', *The Historical Journal*, 68(2), pp.442-465.

- Ploder, A. and Hamann, J. (2021) 'Practices of Ethnographic Research: Introduction to the Special Issue', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 50(1), pp.3-10.
- Plot, R. (1686) *The Natural History of Staffordshire*. Michigan: ProQuest LLC.
- Polanyi, K. (1957) *The Great Transformation: The political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Powell, A., Francis-Devine, B. and Clark, H. (2022) Youth Unemployment Statistics (05871). Available at:  
<https://www.rsmuk.com/content/dam/media/documents/sn05871/sn05871.pdf>  
(Accessed 10<sup>th</sup> November).
- Queirós, A., Faria, D. and Almeida, F. (2017) 'Strengths and Limitations of Qualitative and Quantitative Research Methods', *European Journal of Education Studies*, 3(9), pp. 369- 387.
- Raccanello, D., Balbontín-Alvarado, R., da Silva Bezerra, D., Burro, R., Cheraghi, M., Dobrowolska, B., Fagbamigbe, A.F., Faris, M.E., França, T., González-Fernández, B. and Hall, R. (2022) 'Higher Education Students' Achievement Emotions and Their Antecedents in E-Learning amid COVID-19 Pandemic: A Multi-Country Survey', *Learning and Instruction*, 80, p.101629. Available at:  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2022.101629>.
- Raymen, T. (2015) 'Designing-in Crime by Designing-Out the Social? Situational Crime Prevention and the Intensification of Harmful Subjectivities', *British Journal of Criminology*, 56 (3), pp. 497-514

- Raymen, T. (2018) *Parkour, Deviance and Leisure in the Late-Capitalist City: An Ethnography*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Raymen, T. (2019a) 'Lifestyle Gambling in Accelerated Culture', in T. Raymen, O. and Smith, O. (eds.) *Deviant Leisure: Criminological Perspectives on Leisure and Harm*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.259-282.
- Raymen, T. (2019b) 'The Enigma of Social Harm and The Barrier of Liberalism: Why Zemiology Needs A Theory Of The Good', *Justice, Power and Resistance*, 3(1), pp. 134-163.
- Raymen, T. and Kuldova, T.Ø. (2021) 'Clarifying Ultra-Realism: A Response to Wood et al.', *Continental Thought and Theory*, 3(2), pp.244-263.
- Regan, S. (1992) 'From Austerity to Affluence: The Whitson Weddings' in S. Regan (ed.) *Philip Lakin*. London: Palgrave, pp.100-123.
- Reiner, R. (2016) *Crime, the Mystery of the Common-Sense Concept*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Roantree, B. and Vira, K. (2018) *The Rise and Rise of Women's Employment in the UK*. BN234. London: Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/rise-and-rise-womens-employment-uk>. (accessed: 8<sup>th</sup> November 2025).
- Roberts, J.M. and Sanders, T. (2005) 'Before, During and After: Realism, Reflexivity and Ethnography', *The Sociological Review*, 53(2), pp.294-313.

- Roulston, K., DeMarrais, K. and Lewis, J.B. (2003) 'Learning to Interview in the Social Sciences', *Qualitative inquiry*, 9(4), pp.643-668.
- Rousseau, J.J. (1763) *Emilius on Education* (Vol. 1 and 2). London: J. Nourse and P. Vaillant.
- Sandbrook, D. (2015) *Never Dad it so Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles*. London: Hachette UK.
- Schneider, D. and Harknett, K. (2022) Maternal Exposure to Work Schedule Unpredictability and Child Behavior', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 84(1), pp.187-209.
- Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (2020) *Options for increasing adherence to social distancing measures 22nd March 2020*. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5ecd084586650c76acac37e0/25-options-for-increasing-adherence-to-social-distancing-measures-22032020.pdf> (Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2025).
- Shankar, V., Kalyanam, K., Setia, P., Golmohammadi, A., Tirunillai, S., Douglass, T., Hennessey, J., Bull, J.S. and Waddoups, R. (2021) 'How Technology is Changing Retail', *Journal of Retailing*, 97(1), pp.13-27.
- Shaw (2018) *Baby Boomers Versus Millennials: Rhetorical Conflicts and Interest Construction in the New Politics of Intergenerational Fairness*. Available at: <https://feps-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Baby-Boomers-versus-Millennials-Kate-Alexander-Shaw.pdf> (Accessed:10th November 2025).
- Shildrick, T. and MacDonald, R. (2006) 'In Defence of Subculture: Young People, Leisure and Social Divisions', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 9(2), pp.125-140.

- Shildrick, T. and MacDonald, R. (2012) *Poverty and Insecurity: Life in Low-Pay, No-Pay Britain*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Shilling, C. (1991) 'Educating the Body: Physical Capital and the Production of Social Inequalities', *Sociology*, 25(4), pp.653-672.
- Smith, D.J. and Alvarez, S.P. (2017) 'The Demoralizing Trap of Keynesianism', *Journal of Markets and Morality*, 20(1), pp. 55-68.
- Smith, O. and Raymen, T. (2016) 'What's Deviance Got to Do with It? Black Friday Sales, Violence, and Hyper-Conformity', *British Journal of Criminology* 56(2), pp. 389-405.
- Smyth, E. and Nolan, A. (2022) 'Disrupted transitions? Young Adults and the COVID-19 Pandemic' *Economic and Social Research Institute*, 142. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.26504/rs142>
- Solan, M. (2024) *COVID-19 Vaccination May Lower the Risk for Long COVID*. Available at: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-vaccination-may-lower-the-risk-for-long-covid> (Accessed: 15<sup>th</sup> November 2025).
- Spradley, J. (1980) *Participant Observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Standing, G. (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Standing, G. (2014) 'The Precariat', *Contexts*, 13(4), pp. 10-12. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1536504214558209>
- Standing, G. (2021) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class: Special Covid-19 Edition*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

- Stearns, P.N. (2020) *The Industrial Revolution in World History*. London: Routledge.
- Stefanova, V., Farrell, L. and Latu, I. (2023) 'Gender and the Pandemic: Associations Between Caregiving, Working from Home, Personal and Career Outcomes for Women and Men', *Current Psychology*, 42(20), pp.17395-17411.
- Strangleman, T. and Rhodes, J. (2014) 'The 'new' Sociology of Deindustrialisation? Understanding Industrial Change', *Sociology Compass*, 8(4), pp.411-421.
- Streek, W. (2016) *How Will Capitalism End?: Essay's on a Failing System*. London: Verso Books.
- Suhail, A., Iqbal, N. and Smith, J. (2021) 'Lived experiences of all Youth amid COVID-19 crisis: An interpretative phenomenological analysis', *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 67(5), pp.559-566.
- Šumonja, M. (2021) 'Neoliberalism is not Dead—On Political Implications of Covid-19', *Capital and Class*, 45(2), pp.215-227.
- Swain, J. (2018) 'A Hybrid Approach to Thematic Analysis in Qualitative Research: Using a Practical Example', *Sage Research Methods*. Available at: [https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10042537/1/Swain\\_Sage%20analysis%20article%20July%2020171\\_.pdf](https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10042537/1/Swain_Sage%20analysis%20article%20July%2020171_.pdf) (Accessed 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2023).
- Taylor, A. (1995) *Stoke-on-Trent: A Pictorial History*. Chichester: Philmore.
- Telford, L. (2022) 'There is Nothing There': Deindustrialization and Loss in a Coastal Town', *Competition and Change*, 26(2), pp.197-214.
- Telford, L. and Lloyd, A. (2020) 'From "infant Hercules" to "ghost town": Industrial collapse and social harm in Teesside', *Critical Criminology*, 28(4), pp.595-611.

The Economic Times (2023) *Quiet Promotion and its Impact on Your Career*. Available at:

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/jobs/mid-career/quiet-promotion-and-implications-for-mid-career-professionals/articleshow/101237977.cms?from=mdr>

(Accessed 10th November 2025).

*The Elementary Education Act 1893 (C.31)* Available at:

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Vict/56-57/51/enacted>

*The Factory Act 1833*. Available at: [https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-](https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/factoryact/)

[heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/factoryact/](https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/factoryact/)

*The Factory Act 1844*. Available at: [https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-](https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/latefactoryleg/)

[heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/latefactoryleg/](https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/latefactoryleg/)

*The Factory Act 1847*. Available at: [https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-](https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/latefactoryleg/)

[heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/latefactoryleg/](https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/livinglearning/19thcentury/overview/latefactoryleg/)

The Hardship Commission (2015) *Policies, Procedures and Strategies Directory - Hardship*

*Commission Stoke-on-Trent Initial Report 2015. Stoke-on-Trent: City of Stoke on Trent Council*. Available

at: [https://www.stoke.gov.uk/directory\\_record/331771/hardship\\_commission\\_stoke-on-trent\\_initial\\_report\\_2015](https://www.stoke.gov.uk/directory_record/331771/hardship_commission_stoke-on-trent_initial_report_2015). (Accessed 1st May 2022).

Tiesman, H., Marsh, S., Konda, S., Tomasi, S., Wiegand, D., Hales, T. and Webb, S. (2023)

‘Workplace Violence During the COVID-19 Pandemic: March–October 2020, United States’, *Journal of Safety Research*, 82, pp.376-384.

Tisdall, L (2022) ‘State of the field: The modern history of childhood’, *History*, 107(378),

pp.949-964.

- Tombs, S. and Whyte, D. (2011) 'Corporate or Criminal? The Dangers of Reducing Corporate Prosecutions', *New Law Journal*, 161(7449), pp.81-84.
- Tombs, S. and Whyte, D. (2015) *The Corporate Criminal: Why Corporations Must be Abolished*. London: Routledge.
- Touraine, A. (1971) *Post-Industrial Society*. London: Random House.
- Toye, R. (2004) 'Churchill and Britain's "Financial Dunkirk"', *Twentieth Century British History*, 15(4), pp.329- 360.
- Treadwell, J. (2015) 'The Lads Just Playing Away: An Ethnography with England's Hooligan Fringe During the 2006 World Cup'. In T. Thurnell Read and M. Casey (eds.) *Men, Masculinities, Travel and Tourism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, pp. 189-203).
- Treadwell, J. (2020) *Criminological Ethnography an Introduction*. London: Sage.
- Treadwell, J., Briggs, D., Winlow, S. and Hall, S. (2013) 'Shopocalypse now: Consumer Culture and the English Riots of 2011', *British Journal of Criminology*, 53(1), pp.1-17.
- Vaziri, H., Casper, W.J., Wayne, J.H. and Matthews, R.A. (2020) 'Changes to the Work–Family Interface During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Examining Predictors and Implications Using Latent Transition Analysis', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 105(10), p.1073.
- Vecchia, M. Robinso, C, Savic, M., Romiti, M. (2023) *Vertical and Horizontal Mismatch in The Uk: Are Graduates' Skills a Good Fit for Their Jobs?*. Available at: <https://www.niesr.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/DP548-Vertical-and-horizontal-mismatch-in-the-UK.pdf> (Accessed: 10th November 2025).
- Violence Reduction Alliance (2024) *Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Violence Reduction Strategy 2024-2029*. Available at: <https://violencereductionalliance.co.uk/wp->

[content/uploads/Violence-Reduction-Alliance-Strategy\\_Web\\_AW.pdf](#) (Accessed: 11<sup>th</sup> November 2025).

Vromen, A., Lipton, B., Cooper, R., Foley, M. and Rutledge-Prior, S. (2021) *Pandemic Pressures: Job Security and Customer Relations for Retail Workers: Designing Gender Equality into the Future of Work*. Available at <https://hdl.handle.net/2123/29420> (Accessed: 1<sup>st</sup> November 2021).

Wakeman, S. (2017) 'Afterword: The Case for Criminological Autoethnography', *British Journal of Community Justice*, 14(2) pp. 75-78.

Ward, P.R. (2020) 'A Sociology of the Covid-19 Pandemic: A Commentary and Research Agenda for Sociologists', *Journal of Sociology*, 56(4), pp.726-735.

Watson, A. and Till, K.E. (2010) 'Ethnography and Participant Observation', in D. DeLyser, S. Herbert, S. Aitken, M. Crang and L. McDowell (eds.) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Geography*. London: Sage, pp.121-137.

Webster, C., Simpson, D., MacDonald, R., Abbas, A., Cieslik, M., Shildrick, T and, Simpson, M. (2004) *Poor Transitions: Social Exclusion and Young Adults*. London: Policy Press.

Wiles, R., Crow, G., Heath, S. and Charles, V. (2008) 'The Management of Confidentiality and Anonymity in Social Research' *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 11(5), pp.417-428.

Williams, B. (2019) 'Austerity Britain—A Brief History', *Political Insight*, 10(1), pp

Williams, G.A. (2024) 'Learning Lessons from the Austerity Period and the COVID-19 Crisis in England to Help Build a More Resilient Health System', in S. Thomas and P. Flemming

- (eds.) *Handbook of Health System Resilience*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, pp. 262-278.
- Willis, P. (1977) *Learning to Labour*. London: Saxon House.
- Willis, P. (1978) *Profane Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul
- Willis, P. (1990) *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young*. Colorado: Westview Press.
- Wilson, J.Q. (1975) *Thinking About Crime*. New York City: Basic Books.
- Wilson, J.Q. and Kelling, G.L. (1982) 'Broken Windows: The Police and Neighborhood Safety', *The Atlantic Monthly*, 249, pp, 29-38.
- Wincup, E. (2017) *Criminological Research: Understanding Qualitative Methods*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Winlow, S and Hall, S. (2022) *The Death of the Left*. Bristol: Bristol Policy Press.
- Winlow, S. (2001) *Badfellas: Crime, Tradition and New Masculinities*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Winlow, S. (2014) 'Trauma, Guilt and the Unconscious: Some Theoretical Notes on Violent Subjectivity', *The Sociological Review*, 62(2), pp.32-49.
- Winlow, S. (2019) 'What lies beneath? Some Notes on Ultra-Realism, and the Intellectual Foundations of the 'Deviant Leisure' Perspective' in T. Raymen and O. Smith (eds.) *Deviant leisure: Criminological Perspectives on Leisure and Harm*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, pp. 45-65
- Winlow, S. (2025) *The Politics of Nostalgia: Class, Rootlessness and Decline*. Leeds: Emerald Publishing Limited.

- Winlow, S. and Hall, S. (2006) *Violent Night: Urban Leisure and Contemporary Culture*.  
Oxford: Berg.
- Winlow, S. and Hall, S. (2013) *Rethinking Social Exclusion: The End of the Social?*. London:  
SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Winlow, S. and Hall, S. (2017) 'Criminology and Consumerism' in P. Carlen. *Alternative  
Criminologies* (ed.) London: Routledge, pp. 92-109.
- Winlow, S. and Hall, S. (2019) 'Shock and Awe: On Progressive Minimalism and Retreatism,  
and the New Ultra-Realism', *Critical Criminology*, 27(1), pp. 21-36.
- Winlow, S., Hall, S., Briggs, D. and Treadwell, J. (2015) *Riots and Political Protest*. London:  
Routledge.
- Wood, D., Crapnell, T., Lau, L., Bennett, A., Lotstein, D., Ferris, M. and Kuo, A. (2018)  
'Emerging adulthood as a critical stage in the life course', in N. Halfon, C.B. Forrest,  
R.M. Lerner, E.M. Faustman (eds.) *Handbook of Life Course Health and Development*.  
London: Springer, pp.123-143.
- Wood, M.A. (2019) 'What is realist about ultra-realist criminology? A critical appraisal of the  
perspective,' *Journal of Theoretical & Philosophical Criminology*, 11 (3), pp. 95-114
- Wood, M.A., Anderson, B., and Richards, I. (2020) 'Breaking Down the Pseudo-pacification  
Process: Eight critiques of Ultra-Realist Crime Causation Theory', *The British Journal  
of Criminology*, 60(3), pp.642-661.
- Yardley, E. (2021) 'Technology-facilitated domestic abuse in political economy: A new  
theoretical framework', *Violence Against Women*, 27(10), pp.1479-1498.

- Yates, J. (2006) 'You Just Don't Grass': Youth, Crime and 'Grassing' in a Working-Class Community', *Youth Justice*, 6(3), pp. 195-210.
- Young, J. (1975) 'Working Class Criminology' in I. R. Taylor, P. Walton, and J. Young (eds.) *Critical Criminology*. Michigan: Routledge, pp. 63-94
- Young, J. (1999) *The Exclusive Society: Social Exclusion, Crime and Difference in Late Modernity*. California: SAGE Publications.
- Young, M. (1958) *The Rise of Meritocracy*. Oxfordshire: Taylor and Francis.
- Žižek, S (2011) *Living in the End Times*. London: Verso Books.
- Žižek, S (2020) *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Zizek, S. (1993) *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Žižek, S. (2001) *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?*. London: Verso Books.
- Žižek, S. (2008) *Violence*. London: Profile Books.
- Zizek, S. (2021) *Pandemic! 2: Chronicles of a Time Lost*. Hoboken: John Wiley and Sons.