

## Disadvantaged young people: the depth of the impact of Covid 19

When the Covid 19 storm hit, any notion that people in Scotland 'were all in the same boat' well and truly ran aground. The impact has to a large extent been determined by how well equipped they were to begin with. Those in the most fragile boats have been most exposed and worst affected and have had to fight to survive. Recovery will be long and slow. Boats and the people in them need to recover and be repaired and for those with limited means,

### Introduction

The headlines from the recent budget provided much-needed reassurance and a sense of optimism following what can only be described as a period of unprecedented challenge since the outbreak of the pandemic. It was reported that employment is up. Investment is growing. Public services are improving. The public finances are stabilising. And wages are rising. This may well be true and thankfully for a large proportion of the population recovery will be quicker than initially projected. However, for those that were already struggling pre pandemic, their reality will be very different.

The recovery is polarised. For most people it will be a steady process as they put their lives back together. For those whose lives were not together in the first place, it can be hard to imagine a positive future. The pandemic has made their difficult lives worse – the extent to which is only now becoming clear. A cohort of young people that were already disadvantaged by poor physical or mental health, caring responsibilities, disability, trauma, and poverty are now at the back of an even longer queue. This has been exacerbated by losing access to education, school, and other services, being stuck in households that are unstable, experiencing shortages of food and fuel, living with bereavement, with no access to technology or social networks.

Many young people have not felt safe for the duration of the pandemic, some have experienced trauma and as a result re-emerging into society is very challenging. Social anxiety and mental health problems have increased to levels that have not been seen previously. *According to a YoungMinds survey 67% of young people aged 13-25 years old believed that the pandemic will have a long-term negative effect on their mental health<sup>1</sup>.*

The Covid-19 crisis is unprecedented because it is not just an economic crisis. It has transcended all aspects of life. The green shoots of recovery that are being highlighted are primarily economic and although welcome, people will be dealing with the complex physical, mental, and emotional effects long after the financial impact. For individual families that were already living in poverty (one million people), there are no green shoots at all. ***One quarter of adults in Scotland are now concerned about providing for their family and reported that they are very or somewhat worried about affording enough food for themselves or their household in the next month<sup>ii</sup>***. The impact on people's lives and happiness, their ability to function, thrive and achieve is significant. Pressures on, and reductions to, vital services are exacerbating these issues resulting in people feeling at the point of crisis.

Youth unemployment was reported to be 75,000<sup>iii</sup> prior to the end of the Job Retention Scheme and excluding 2021 school leaver statistics. This figure includes a cohort of young people who would struggle to succeed even in the most positive economic context due to the inequality that they face. This was around 30-35,000 young people in Scotland pre Covid. These are the young people that often do not have an equal start, experience trauma and face challenges that significantly inhibit their ability to progress successfully. There is no doubt that with youth unemployment at 75,000, the number of young people in this cohort will have increased and their challenges will be greater. The complex solutions that are needed for this group of young people are not in evidence in society's recovery plan. They are specific to individuals' circumstances and could not have been reasonably anticipated. This is a new form of 'Long Covid' but it's not medical.

## Our Data

Inspiring Scotland has worked with this cohort of young people for over 10 years. We invest in a very connected portfolio of trauma informed<sup>iv</sup>, specialist third sector organisations through the Our Future Now fund (OFN). OFN supports 5,000 young people aged 16-25 years old across Scotland per annum that are facing barriers to a successful future. This cohort requires specialist, bespoke support that is flexible, delivered by a trusted, independent (not authority) skilled provider. The portfolio is active in 27 local authorities and did not stop delivering during the pandemic. Through creative use of technology, the trusted relationships that were built with young people were maintained. This was vital as most other services were withdrawn or scaled back. The ventures in the OFN portfolio have walked through the Covid experience with these young people.

Developed from 10 years of rigorous data collection and evaluation, The Matrix is Inspiring Scotland's system that tracks young people supported and identifies issues as they emerge. This enables support to be adapted quickly to respond to the needs of young people and reduce the risk of long-term

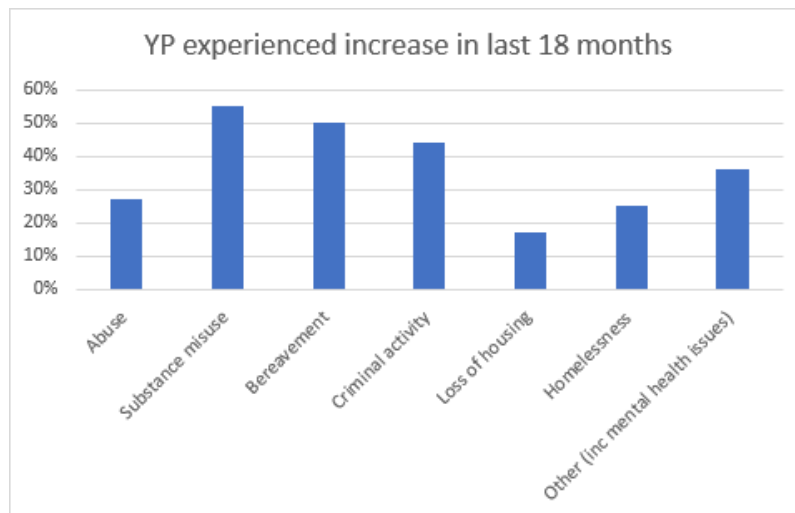
damage. Knowledge is key when working with young people that have experienced trauma and The Matrix provides the information that is required to ensure that support is appropriate and effective.

In addition to the collection of data, we are committed to listening to young people facing challenges and amplifying their voice to further inform our work and the work of others. We have surveyed over 400 young people (almost 60% of whom live in Deciles 1-3 of the Scottish Index on Multiple Deprivation (SIMD)) and over 100 frontline staff over the course of October 2021. We discussed the findings with a roundtable of 12 charity leaders from specialist organisations operating across Scotland to gain further insight. The key findings from our analysis of The Matrix, the survey and the roundtable are shown below

### Key Findings

- Although the young people supported through OFN are all individual there are two very broad categories emerging: those that **are isolated and withdrawn** and those that are **desperate to get out of the home and reconnect with friends**.
- A **deterioration in young people's mental health** – particularly in relation to self-esteem, confidence and anxiety came through most strongly from all sources of information. Data from The Matrix shows that prior to the first lockdown, frontline staff reported that low self-confidence/esteem issues was a significant issue for 27.37% young people. This figure has risen to 42.86% over the duration of the Covid pandemic.
- The increase in **mental distress** is the result of a complex range of interconnected experiences and circumstances that have caused **trauma**. This has can cause unstable housing and financial pressure. See Figure 1 below.
- In order to manage this mental distress, there is an **increase in substance misuse** - particularly alcohol and prescription drugs. For some young people this has led to increased violence and criminal activity (see Figure 1 below) through the re-emergence of gang culture in Glasgow and surrounding areas in the west of Scotland where there is the greatest number of young people in the OFN cohort.

Figure 1: The prevalence of experiences in last 18months



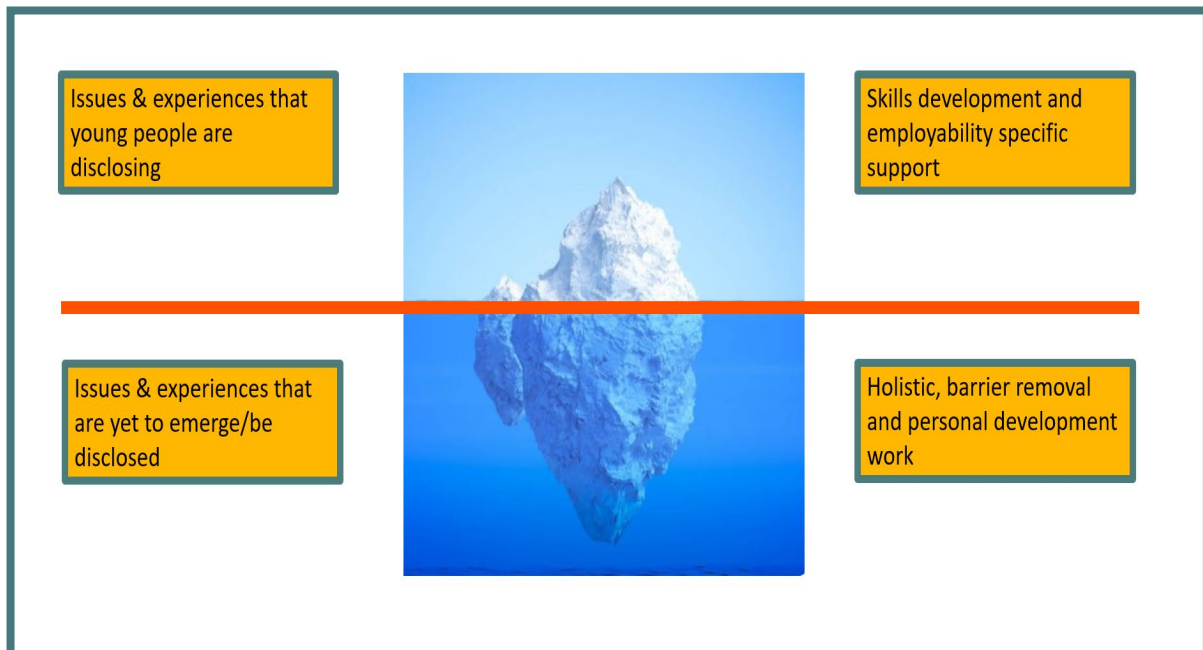
- The reduction in support services (health, social work, policing, education & training) in communities resulting from the pandemic has also seen an increase in organised crime. **Vulnerable young people are targets** and many see this as a means of making money when their legitimate prospects appear very limited. This is also reflected in the increase in criminal activity in Figure 1 above.
- 94% of staff report that **young people will need support for longer** – in many cases for 12 months. Prior to the pandemic the typical length of time that young people would be supported before achieving a positive destination was 3-6 months.
- 52% of young people surveyed are seeking part time work. Pre-pandemic most young people were seeking full time work. It appears that this is due to young people feeling less confident, increasingly anxious and feeling the need to 'build up' to full time employment. **The young people supported through OFN are far from job ready and struggle to engage with universal, job creation programmes.**
- **Young people want to work in industries that they are familiar with** – frontline staff identified hospitality (95%) and retail (91%) as most attractive. However, 64% of staff report that driving jobs are unattainable because of the cost and opportunity barriers. There was further evidence that young people 'can't be it if they can't see it'. Where young people can be educated about, and exposed to, different industries they become more willing to work there. The OFN cohort needs this exposure and familiarisation alongside support to remove barriers, grow their confidence and aspiration to pursue these opportunities.

## The Iceberg

Young people have never been more willing to disclose sensitive information, including violence and criminality. Specialist staff conclude this is because of the trusted relationship that they have and a reflection of their desperation to access support. Staff also report that young people seem to have no fear of consequence as they embrace greater freedom. This openness provides an opportunity to intervene, but it is also clear that 'the worst is yet to come'. Staff are working with young people that are traumatised and in need of help but the full details of their experiences during the pandemic are only beginning to emerge.

**Figure 2** below illustrates the extent to which the issues that young people are facing are hidden. It is likely that the details of their experiences during the pandemic will emerge over time. We are already seeing the impact – anti social behaviour, increased anxiety, isolation, etc but details of the trauma are only beginning to be disclosed. Whilst maintaining our ambition for young people, there is a need for greater emotional and practical personal development support over a longer period before more traditional, focussed employability work can be undertaken.

**Figure 2: Young People – The Covid Iceberg**



## Conclusion

Although the crisis that we have experienced over the past 18 months is not just economic, financial data is useful in reflecting the considerable impact of the pandemic. Economic recovery to pre-pandemic levels is not expected until the end of 2023 according to the Scottish Government's Central Forecast. Overall unemployment levels are expected to reach pre-pandemic levels towards the end of Q1 2025. Young people have been worst affected by Covid-19 - 63% of those that lost their job between February 20 and February 21 are aged 16-25 years old. In Scotland, they are twice as likely to have been put on furlough, 2.5 times more likely to work in sectors that were fully shut down and are losing jobs faster than any other age group<sup>v</sup>.

The young people supported through OFN are unlikely to have been able to secure a job without significant support even prior to the pandemic. The impact on this group of young people is more severe and recovery will take longer than the general population.

Given the challenges faced by these young people and the negative impact of the pandemic on their lives, we have the makings of a lost generation. By understanding the complexity of the situation and the need for very personalised, flexible support delivered by trauma informed, trusted staff we have an opportunity to reduce the impact. The scale of the issue requires all sectors to be working together. There is an urgency to increase capacity and the scale of support that is available but dealing with this form of 'Long Covid' will not be a quick fix.

Covid-19 recovery plans are primarily focussed on the economy. For the young people described in this paper, we need a much more holistic response. We have a choice. If we hear their voices and respond appropriately, we can provide hope and opportunity. If we do not, we will consign a significant group of young people to ongoing damage and poor outcomes that could limit their progress throughout their lives. We must make the choice quickly and it must be the positive choice. Aside from the moral imperative that exists, providing this support makes economic sense and we will all reap the rewards.

## Case Studies

The following two case studies of James and Jody represent the lives of anonymous young people being supported by Our Future Now ventures and bring to the fore the complexity, challenge and impact of Covid-19 on their lives.

**James aged 17 years old engaged with an OFN venture just prior to leaving school in May 2020. James' average attendance at school had been poor (42%) and he did not achieve many qualifications. James was demotivated and unhappy when he engaged.**

When he was 14 years old, James' dad died because of drug misuse. His surviving parent has issues with mental health. As the eldest of 3 children, James is a carer for his Mum and his 2 younger siblings. James' family lives in poverty and there has not always been adequate food or heating at home.

Through the support provided by the OFN venture it was identified that James needed help with literacy and numeracy. This was discreetly provided on a 1:1 basis and James progressed well. James' Mum was reluctant for him to engage with any 'services' as she is fearful of authority, however the independent nature of the OFN venture enabled family support to be provided. Help with form filling and money management stabilised the family. James' mum would only engage with the trusted worker. This made life easier for James and he was supported to undertake certificated training. The trusted worker was on hand to respond to the challenges that arose for James throughout the pandemic. This included James becoming very isolated from friends, shortages of food and toiletries and his mum being admitted to hospital for a period.

James was provided with a tablet and a data package that enabled him to maintain contact with the OFN venture throughout periods of lockdown. His trusted worker would also drop by and check on James and his family from the garden. James' mum's mental health has deteriorated significantly over the past 18 months, and it has been difficult for James to make progress in his own life as a result. He has however improved his literacy and numeracy and gained qualifications which has improved his self-esteem.

The OFN venture arranged for James to undertake a work placement with a landscaping company. This proved challenging for James but with support, he progressed and completed the placement. He has been invited back to work on an extended placement with certificated training. The small, local employer has also been adversely affected by the pandemic and is not able to offer James a job at this stage. The OFN venture is supporting both James and the employer to look at Kickstart.

Unfortunately, James' grandmother – the only relative that he had contact with out with his immediate family died suddenly. This has devastated James' family. The OFN venture is working to support James, his mum and his siblings and keep James focussed on his future.

**Jody moved around a lot when she was young and now lives with her grandmother. She has a difficult relationship with her Mum. Jody witnessed the violent death of her uncle and has mental health issues as a result. She has sporadic contact with her Mum who has addiction issues.**

Jody was in S3 when Covid-19 hit in March 2020. Prior to the pandemic, she struggled at school academically and could be disruptive. The school was keen to support Jody, but her attendance was poor, and she did not feel comfortable in the school environment. She did not have a good relationship with her teachers and was mistrusting of their genuine offers of help.

When the first lockdown was imposed, Jody did not take part in any on-line learning. She had no access to technology and her grandmother who has poor health did not have the skills to navigate this new form of schooling. Jody's attendance at school in S4 worsened. Jody has lost out on the majority of S3 and S4 and effectively finished her education aged 14 years old. She suffered anxiety and began to self-harm. She was referred to CAMHS but is unlikely to be seen for some time. Jody has kept in touch with friends and since the lifting of restrictions has been drinking alcohol to manage her mental health issues which has resulted in unsafe, risk-taking behaviour.

*An OFN venture engaged Jody through their detached street work programme. It took a long time to build trust with Jody – meeting her on the street with her friends. Her engagement was erratic. When some of her friends returned to school in August this year, Jody felt concerned about her lack of opportunities and lack of education/skills. This manifested in more risk-taking behaviour and low-level crime.*

With consistent and continued contact with Jody, the OFN venture asked her to help make food hampers for older people in the community. Jody did well and enjoyed this activity alongside her trusted worker and her gran was proud of her. Jody was then supported to investigate jobs in social care with the elderly. The OFN venture had links with a local employer and Jody embarked on a job placement from which she secured a part time job. She is now receiving support to gain qualifications that will enable her to progress within social care. Her trusted worker is in contact with the employer and with Jodie and helps resolve any difficulties.

Support will continue as Jody keeps developing her resilience, confidence, and self-esteem.



## Inspiring Scotland & Our Future Now

[Inspiring Scotland](#) believes that wherever you start in life you should get a fair chance to enjoy a happy, healthy life free from poverty or disadvantage.

We exist to tackle some of the long-term, entrenched social problems faced by Scotland's people and communities.

[Our Future Now](#) is Inspiring Scotland's fund aimed specifically at supporting young people into education, employment or training.

It builds on a 10-year track record in helping to reduce youth unemployment, working with 12 high performing and high potential charities active across 24 geographical areas. Exceptionally well-placed to make lasting changes in young people's lives, these charities support young people in their communities and schools, at home, and in their workplaces.

### Find out more

Read more of Our Future Now's [Insight papers](#)

To have a conversation about this paper and our work in this area please contact:

Louise Stevenson [louise@inspiringscotland.org.uk](mailto:louise@inspiringscotland.org.uk)

Duncan MacKechnie [duncan@inspiringscotland.org.uk](mailto:duncan@inspiringscotland.org.uk)

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<sup>i</sup> YoungMinds Coronavirus: Impact on Young People with Mental Health Needs (Survey 4) February 2021

<sup>ii</sup> Scottish Government Scotland's Wellbeing: The Impact of COVID-19 – Chapter 4: Communities, Poverty, Human Rights

<sup>iii</sup> Scottish Government and SDS Labour Market Update, Young Person Guarantee Implementation Group Meeting, July 2021

<sup>iv</sup> Further explanation of 'trauma informed' - [NHS Education for Scotland: Transforming Psychological Trauma - A Knowledge & Skills Framework for the Scottish Workforce](#)

<sup>v</sup> Scottish Government, *the impacts of Covid-19 on Equality in Scotland*