

## **‘Cycles of Disadvantage’ Revisited: Young People, Families and Poverty Across Generations**

### **ABSTRACT**

One of Andy Furlong’s<sup>1</sup> abiding concerns was to show how the problems of working-class youth are often, straightforwardly, the outcome of inequalities in employment opportunities. On rarer occasions, however, this explanation fits less well. Some young people grow up in families where poverty *seems* more deeply embedded and *inherent* to those families. Here old ideas about a cultural ‘underclass’ can be tempting to politicians and policy makers.

Our qualitative research, with twenty families living in extremely deprived UK neighbourhoods, showed that *neither* a simple lack of job opportunities *nor* ‘cultures of worklessness’ explained why hardship persisted for them. Our argument is that circumstances which appear to fit with the idea of an inter-generational, cultural ‘underclass’, in fact, have their provenance in a semi-permanent *constellation of external socio-economic pressures* bearing on successive generations of families over decades. Examples did include a shared context of declining job opportunities but extended to a contracting and disciplinary Welfare State, punitive criminal justice systems, poor quality education, and the physical decline of working-class neighbourhoods. We take one example - the destructive impact of local drug markets – to uncover the complex, obscure processes that compound the disadvantage faced by working-class young adults and their families over generations.

**Key words:** poverty/ class/ youth/ ‘cycles of disadvantage’/ generations

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<sup>1</sup> This paper comes from a project that the three authors worked on. The paper was in progress when Andy Furlong died in 2017. It felt right to name him posthumously as a co-author albeit that this creates a stylistic irregularity in that, at times, we (Robert MacDonald and Tracy Shildrick) make direct and explicit reference to Andy’s wider work and intellectual legacy. We are indebted to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for supporting the study and to Robert Crow and, in particular, Johann Roden for their work on the project. We are also grateful to the anonymous reviewers whose criticisms and suggestions have helped us improve the paper.

## Introduction

How can we explain the persistence of poverty in the face of social reform and rising living standards? This has been a recurrent question for social scientists, dating back at least to the Victorian surveys of 'the poor'. Of course, understanding the *causes* of poverty implies the best ways to tackle it and these questions have occupied politicians and policy makers just as much as they have researchers. Cultural arguments that implicate the behaviour, attitudes and practices of 'the poor' are set against structural ones that emphasise socio-economic and political causes, and the importance of challenging social inequality, if we want to reduce or be rid of poverty (Lister, 2004; Shildrick and Rucell, 2015). A problem for social scientists who prefer to see the causes of poverty as lying outwith the choices and lifestyles of individuals is the apparent persistence of poverty in *particular families* over time. This suggests poverty might not be to do with lack of opportunities but be culturally learned, socialised and passed on through families. In the UK, government has argued that young people growing up in 'workless families' inherit anti-employment attitudes and shun paid jobs for a life on 'the dole' (see Shildrick et al, 2012b). Regardless of the weight of social scientific evidence stacked against them (e.g. MacDonald and Marsh, 2005), these old ideas continue to have powerful influence on social policy, with the UK Government's recent *Troubled Families Programme* being just the latest in a chain of policy programmes that seek to change the behaviour of 'the poor'<sup>2</sup>.

In this article, we engage with these old ideas with the benefit of new, and we suggest, quite rare empirical research. This comprised detailed, lengthy, biographically-oriented interviews with middle-aged parents and young adults from the same 'hard to reach' families – families that were typified by severe, multiple disadvantages and lasting poverty across generations. Whilst none were participating in it at the time, we think that these are exactly the *sort* of families imagined by UK Government in their *Troubled Families Programme*. Yet our reading of the interviews with these twenty families led us to a different way of understanding their

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<sup>2</sup> There is not the need nor the space here to describe the UK government's multi-million pound *Troubled Families Programme (TFP)*, except to say that it was based on the idea that a relatively small number of impoverished, often 'workless', 'chaotic' families (originally tallied as 120, 000) were responsible for a large proportion of crime, anti-social behaviour, school truancy, social security expenditure and other social problems, and that 'hands on', 'intensive', no-nonsense social work could 'turn around' these families. Outlandish government claims for the success of the programme have been punctured by devastating evaluation reports and sociological critique (see Crossley, 2015; Shildrick et al, 2016; Portes, 2016).

poverty and troubles – and our emergent thinking was given momentum by a theoretical suggestion we picked up from a famous, earlier UK programme of research on families and poverty. We refer to Rutter and Madge's *Cycles of Disadvantage* (1976). This book and its associated research and reviews was first motivated by the interest of Sir Keith Joseph (then Secretary of State for Social Security) in 'the persistence of deprivation, despite general economic advance, and to the evidence that the same families tended to be deprived generation after generation' (Matthews, 1976: v). Breaking this alleged 'cycle of deprivation' (as the research was initially labelled) was and remains a key social policy interest of UK governments. The original argument of this paper, and hinted at by Rutter and Madge, is that even when there is a strong *appearance* of family-based processes of cultural inheritance of poverty this might be better understood in terms of the ways that successive generations of the same family respond in similar or sometimes new ways to the persistent inequalities and disadvantages faced in a shared, common, lasting social context.

The paper has the following five parts. Firstly, we situate our discussion in a brief sketch of recent, UK political and policy debates about poverty, showing how our research set out to test some key claims. Secondly, the design and methods of the research are described. In the third part, we describe how a different way of understanding the persistent troubles and poverty of our research participants emerged – and we present the main thrust of our argument here. In the fourth part, we elucidate and develop that argument by drawing on one aspect of the disadvantageous social context shared by our families over time: the local drug-crime economy. Finally, we summarise and conclude our arguments.

### **Poverty, Policy and Politics in the UK: the return of 'the underclass'**

Resurgent in the UK have been political approaches to poverty that characterise this in terms of behaviour, life-style and choices of individuals and families. Championed by the right-wing think tank the *Centre for Social Justice*, and then adopted into Coalition and Conservative Government policy since 2010 (via, for instance, the 2016 *Welfare Reform and*

*Work Act*), is a way of thinking about poverty that downplays material disadvantages<sup>3</sup>. Here, for instance, 'educational failure', 'addiction' and 'serious personal debt' are regarded as personal 'pathways to poverty' rather than possible outcomes of it (CSJ, 2015). Poverty as material hardship and lack of income is discounted; evident, for example, in the scrapping of the *Child Poverty Act 2010*, and the abandonment of its targets to eradicate child poverty by 2020. In this view of the world, individual behaviour trumps structural inequality.

We say 'resurgent' because, despite the Government's claim for policy innovation and a fresh approach to tackling poverty and 'troubled families', these really are old ideas. The history of UK poverty research has a tendency for 'us' up here (sociologists, politicians, social reformers, policy makers) to peer at 'them' down there (Crossley, 2017); surveying, investigating, measuring, and observing 'the poor' for signs and explanations of their difference and predicament, often seeing this in terms of a culture or 'a subculture with its own structure and rationale, as a way of life which is passed down from generation to generation along family lines' (Lewis, 1967, quoted in Lister, 2004, p. 106). Stretching back over centuries, a whole variety of labels have been tagged to those said to make up this 'underclass' (Morris, 1994; MacDonald, 1997). Welshman (2013: 14) argues that there are at least nine iterations of the underclass idea and, for him, 'the social residuum of the 1880s is the troubled family of the present day' (2013: 14). That 'worklessness' might be intergenerational, preferred and a result of a learned, cultural dependency on welfare benefits was a central tenet of the dominant form of underclass theory developed by Charles Murray (1990, 1994) and others in the US and UK in the 1980s and '90s. There has been stringent critique of these ideas by UK social scientists, not least in work by one of the authors (see MacDonald, 1997; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). That has not stopped their profusion and popularity in UK politics. Iain Duncan Smith, until recently the UK government Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, reprised Murray's ideas by arguing that 'entrenched poverty' is an outcome of 'cultures of worklessness' and 'welfare dependency' that are passed down the generations which, it is claimed, can result in 'families where no-

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<sup>3</sup> That is not to say that prior New Labour approaches to 'social exclusion' were free of underclass thinking (see Levitas, 1998).

one has worked for three generations'. This belief has, arguably, attained the status of self-evident truth because of its repetition by social commentators and senior politicians from different political parties (see MacDonald et al, 2013).

The research engaged critically with and tested these influential underclass ideas. It had two central questions. Firstly, are there really families where no-one has worked across three generations? Secondly, even if this not the case, in high unemployment locales, are young adults inheriting from their parents and grandparents cultural outlooks, values and practices that make them unemployed and maintain their poverty?

### **Twenty families: researching 'cultures of worklessness'**

To provide a critical test we purposefully selected research sites *most likely* to reveal these alleged 'cultures of worklessness'. We chose two working-class neighbourhoods (one in Glasgow, Scotland and one in Middlesbrough, England) that had stable, predominantly ethnically white British populations (i.e. families often tended to live here over decades) and which had been subject to serious, long-term economic decline, multiple deprivation and persistently high unemployment

These, we are confident, were good places in which to locate our research (see Shildrick et al, 2012a for fuller description and justification). Consider this viewpoint, from a history of Glasgow ('Parkhill' is the pseudonym we gave to our Glasgow research site). It repeats neatly the way that dominant 'underclass' discourses frame the difficulties of Parkhill and places like it:

The basic problem in areas like 'Parkhill' is that a lifestyle has emerged, and we are now into its third generation. The grandfathers lost their jobs, the fathers didn't work and now these in turn have produced kids... There are no jobs for the people in Parkhill... but they have learned to survive on benefits supplemented by the black economy... There are no books on Parkhill, no autobiographies of life there (since no one famous came from Parkhill). It doesn't feature in histories of the city... Poor Parkhill. I feel for it the way I would a scubby stray dog (Mitchell, 2005: 108-9).

The argument goes that those at the bottom – ‘trapped’ in impoverished places like Parkhill – are there because a ‘lifestyle’ learned through families, over generations, keeps them there. ‘Work disappeared’ (Wilson, 1996), the working-class poor are left abandoned and seek ways to survive in adverse circumstances – *cultural* responses to structural economic change - which over time *themselves* become impediments to social mobility away from the ‘underclass’ (see MacDonald, 1997 for different versions of underclass theory). These ideas find their expression in local histories, like Mitchell’s (above), and in the common-sense understandings of social welfare practitioners who work in the communities of Parkhill - and ‘East Kelby’, in Middlesbrough, also a pseudonym. Asked to describe what might lie at the root of high levels of local unemployment, one ‘welfare to work’ advisor told us ‘[they are] often coming from families with second, third generational unemployment and they are too far into the habit of unemployment to get out of it’. In the same vein, a Housing Officer said: ‘with some it’s the case that when grandfathers haven’t worked and fathers haven’t worked, well why should I bother?’.

A wide variety of strategies were used, across an eight-month period of community-based fieldwork, to try to find evidence to support these theories of a ‘workless underclass’. We aimed to recruit twenty families (ten in each locality) where at least one family member in each of three generations (‘young adult’, ‘parent’, ‘grandparent’) had never been in employment<sup>4</sup>. It was impossible to recruit such a sample. Typically, representatives of the ‘grandparent generation’, in these impoverished neighbourhoods, were deceased, or too ill to take part and/ or had had lives in which employment figured large. Just as one cannot prove that the Yeti does *not* exist, we cannot prove that there are no families in the UK where ‘no-one has worked for three generations’. Our research shows this, however, to be a highly implausible idea (MacDonald et al, 2013).

In failing to find the sort of families we were looking for we progressively relaxed our recruitment criteria (see Shildrick et al, 2012 for a fuller discussion); aiming for a sample of families that had ‘extensive experience of unemployment’ over two generations. The

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<sup>4</sup> The research was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Research ethics were approved by Teesside University following British Sociological Association guidelines. A key imperative was to preserve participants’ anonymity by using pseudonyms. Because interviewees sometimes reported things which might threaten their anonymity we occasionally also had to alter minor biographical details.

achieved sample was as follows. Forty-seven people from twenty families (ten Glasgow, ten Middlesbrough) participated in the research. Twenty-eight were women and nineteen were men. We interviewed at least two members of each family, from different generations; typically, a parent (usually aged in his or her 40s or 50s), who had been out of employment for at least five years and his or her unemployed son or daughter (mostly aged under 21 years and usually never having had a job). Parents and their working-age children did not necessarily now live in the same household. Participants claimed a range of 'out of work benefits', e.g. Job Seeker's Allowance (JSA), Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and Income Support (IS). Nine interviewees, all but one in the younger generation, reported receiving no benefits or other income.

Complicated family trees and relationships made it difficult to identify potential interviewees and some refused to participate. Fieldwork was time-consuming and challenging (some people led what might be described as 'chaotic lives' making them hard to pin down for interview). To cover their expenses and encourage participation interviewees received £20. This proved to be one motivation for participation, but most said that they simply wanted to help us with the study. Qualitative, biographically-focused interviews were normally conducted one-to-one in people's homes (these were audio-recorded and sometimes very lengthy; up to four hours in one instance but usually between one and two hours). Analysis proceeded from the verbatim transcription of interviews and construction of 'life history grids' for each participant. Case studies of each family were produced, presenting the relevant material under thematic codes for each family member meaning that we could see the extent to which experiences were shared or not across different generations of the same family. Case studies were read and debated by all the research team and used to generate the research findings.

The idea of families where no-one in three generations has ever worked is implausible but else did this research conclude? The second main headline finding is that even in this prime territory with such a promising sample, we were unable to locate anything resembling a 'culture of worklessness'. This popular idea rang hollow when set against the detailed, complex, often difficult stories that participants told of their deep family troubles and long-term poverty (see Shildrick et al, 2016).

## **Digging deeper: the *atypical* story of twenty families**

We could easily leave the story there. We could find no families where ‘three generations had never worked’, nor any evidence of ‘a culture of worklessness’ in families where it might be most likely to be present. These ideas had no value in explaining the unemployment and other troubles of the young people growing up in these families. For explanation we could have simply nodded towards the usual – and usually valid – accounts common in youth studies that see youth unemployment as an outcome of limitations in the structure of opportunities (e.g. see Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Yet such an explanation would not be sufficient either. Just as John Macnicol (1994: 30) in the 1990s discounted the idea of an underclass at the same time as recognising that ‘something new and frightening’ had happened’ to blighted inner-city areas of the US and UK, we can dismiss dominant underclass ideas whilst simultaneously realising that our research with these twenty families still poses important and difficult sociological questions.

We have done much research with people living in adverse socio-economic circumstances – including in some of the same research neighbourhoods as this project (e.g. MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Usually, we have been able to explain young people’s ‘unsuccessful’ transitions to adulthood - in general terms – as result of the lack of decent opportunities available (MacDonald and Shildrick, 2017). Yet the stories we gathered in this research were of a quite different order to those of our previous studies. People’s lives were more desperate; their troubles – caused and faced - were quantitatively and qualitatively *more* extreme; harder and more in number and severity. To paraphrase Macnicol (1994), *something* was going on here.

Each of the twenty families had a unique story to tell, of course. But all of them reported several similar ‘troubles’. A few reported them all. By their own testimonies, these were troubles they faced – and that they caused. Unsurprisingly, because they were older and because they had been recruited because of their very long-term ‘worklessness’, it was the ‘parent’ middle-generation of these families that tended to talk about the most and the most severe problems. These included: ‘failed’ schooling, regular truancy and leaving with low (or no) educational qualifications; not completing or making little progress with post-16 training schemes; regular and often long-term unemployment and economic inactivity; anti-



social behaviour, offending and imprisonment, and a punitive, non-rehabilitative criminal justice system; problematic drug and alcohol use (and addiction); violence, domestic violence and physical, sexual and emotional abuse (as perpetrator and/ or victim); criminal victimisation and the stress of living in deprived, high crime neighbourhoods; poor quality and insecure housing; mental and physical ill-health; and, persistent reliance on a welfare benefits system that failed to prevent enduring poverty and material deprivation.

There were complicated, knotty connections between these troubles (see Shildrick et al, 2016), often with one leading to another and then to another. For example, drug or alcohol misuse was frequently linked to offending and to domestic violence, which was linked to family break-ups and parental separation, with homelessness as a possible outcome and disrupted schooling for the children another. In our earlier studies, families proved resilient when faced with one or two problems, drawing upon family and neighbourhood social capital to maintain an albeit shaky footing in the labour market, in the form of long-term churning between low paid jobs and unemployment (Shildrick et al, 2012b). The multiplicity, severity and cumulative, compound effects over years of troubles like these is how we best explain why the families in this study had become *so* distanced from the labour market – and *not* typical of most families in poverty, even in these same neighbourhoods. As one middle-aged mother in Glasgow exclaimed at the end of her interview: ‘how can you work with a life like mine!’ Thus, over decades, to cite Ulrich Beck (1992), poverty attracted ‘an abundance of risks’, limited people’s ability to cope with problems when they arose and inhibited efforts at betterment. This context of persistently impoverished social and economic conditions gave rise to an abundance of social, psychological and financial problems of the sort listed above. They impacted particularly upon those in the middle generation but left a legacy of disadvantage for the younger generation which weighed heavy on their attempts to ‘break the cycle’ and to resist repeating the sorts of lives lived by their parents (which we discuss in more detail in Shildrick et al, 2016).

### **Digging even deeper into ‘cycles of disadvantage’**

Yet we think there is even more to the story than this. This ‘context of persistently impoverished social and economic conditions’ deserves greater attention.

The nudge to our line of argument came from two directions, at roughly the same moment in thinking through the analysis of the research materials. The first was 'bottom up' and came from looking back over thematically coded interview material (to recall, we interviewed family members separately<sup>5</sup> but put their coded interview material together so as to be able to see similarities and differences across the generations). Like all the other interviewees, Davie Harris (55, from Glasgow) was not working when we interviewed him. He was asked to describe his school to work transition and experiences of school and the post-school labour market. He talked about going on a training scheme, when he was 16:

I was out of school only a week and started in that painting and decorating place... it eventually went bust. I never learned nothing in the eighteen month. You were just used as a skivvy. It was supposed to be an apprenticeship but all I learned was to scrape pots and scrape wall paper. Just a skivvy. I was angry, very angry. I'm just a young boy out of school and I thought 'they're going to learn me how to paint and decorate' and I quite fancied that. You get a pittance of pay, but you have to start that way, accept that – do you know what I mean? But I was there eighteen months and I never learned anything and then they went bust. I never even had a brush in my hand.

Davie's step-daughter, Charlotte, was 21 when we interviewed her. A year after leaving school she had started on a social care training course for which she received around £60 per week. She was very sceptical of the quality of the course:

I felt like it was taking a really long time to get trained up. I wasn't getting brought on any. I was there six months, maybe more, but some days they just didn't let me do anything. It was as if they trusted me when they felt like it and not trusting me when they felt like it and I thought 'I'll just leave'.

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<sup>5</sup> Except in one instance when pragmatic convenience meant interviewing the Martin family together.

In Charlotte's 'I wasn't getting brought on any' we see a clear echo of Davie's 'I never learned nothing' from thirty years earlier. Both encountered the sorts of low quality, bottom rung, post-16 training scheme that have been the standard fare for under-qualified, working-class school leavers in the UK for the past thirty years or more (as Andy Furlong's original doctoral study described, 1992). In other words, we glimpse with these extracts the recurrence or continuation of one particular facet of the social structure of a classed society: how post-school opportunities for young people are stratified and unequal (Roberts and Parsell, 1992).

The second spur to the basic argument of our paper came from re-reading Rutter and Madge's classic *Cycles of Disadvantage* (1976). As a reminder, this was the main volume to come from a SSSRC/ DHSS funded programme of research about 'transmitted deprivation'; a programme that was initially instigated by the Conservative Minister, Sir Keith Joseph. Joseph wanted to understand how families became 'trapped in poverty' and 'cycles of deprivation' (see Welshman, 2013). In an almost passing statement in the introduction to the book, Rutter and Madge say the following:

...even with respect to familial continuities, the reason for the intergenerational continuity may not be familial at all but may reflect the influence of a common social environment...on successive generations (1976: 5)<sup>6</sup>.

This is an intriguing and, we think, profoundly important insight. In other words, the persistent, recurrent troubles of families like those we interviewed might not be the outcome of internal processes of intra-family learning and dysfunction but similar and recurrent responses to common (and sometimes new) conditions of class disadvantage. These conditions – we argue - limit chances of mobility, perpetuate poverty and, in turn, are implicated in the re-creation of the multiple, complex, cumulative troubles of these families.

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<sup>6</sup> Co-incidentally, one of the examples that Rutter and Madge give of external conditions that can create a 'cycle of disadvantage' bears closely on the labour market conditions of our research sites:

Undoubtedly there are continuities over time...only some of these involve family continuity. Regional continuities are, for example, very striking. Thus, for many years Scotland and northern parts of England have had particularly high rates of unemployment and of poorly paid workers... (1976: 303).

As far as we are aware this idea has not, to date, been investigated seriously, with cross-generational qualitative research, as a way of understanding the situations and prospects of the most disadvantaged working-class young people. We think, therefore, that this research provides a rare opportunity better to theorise the persistence and entrenchment of disadvantage in families over decades.

Because we undertook detailed, lengthy interviews with a reasonably large number of participants (nearly fifty), and that these ranged across a wide variety of topics and recounted life histories, and because we talked to people at different points of the life course (middle-aged parents and young adults), we were able to gain a 'bottom-up' understanding of what might constitute the 'common social environment' in these two localities. This was also enabled by our long-term research in one of these places (Middlesbrough), and by what we know from the research literature about the changing social and economic fortunes and conditions of Parkhill and East Kelby. The list is not exhaustive, but the following emerge from this analysis as elements of the lasting and 'common social environment' that faced these twenty families:

- pre- and post-16 education and training systems that persistently fail sections of the working-class;
- since the 1960s for Parkhill and '70s for East Kelby, a declining local economy marked by persistent high unemployment and limited opportunities for well-paid, secure work;
- a social security (benefits) system that has become less generous and more punitive;
- neighbourhoods that have undergone social decline, withdrawal of services, impoverishment, increased stigma and, for some streets, a poor-quality housing stock and visible, extensive dereliction;
- the destructive impact of a local criminal economy;
- related, the negative effects of a drug economy and drug and alcohol misuse;
- a criminal justice system that has limited rehabilitative effect;
- the socio-spatial concentration of health inequalities.

Although we itemise them separately, of course, these factors interact and combine to create the local set of conditions – *a milieu of hardship and trouble* - in which these working-class people have lived and grown up. It is also true that many localities might face similar sets of conditions. East Kelby and Parkhill are not unique even if by objective measures they are extremely deprived. Nor are we arguing that *intra*-family processes are irrelevant in shaping the outcomes and experiences of our research participants. For instance, elsewhere we have pointed to how the lack of economic capital, and some forms of social and cultural capital, inhibits the ability of parents to help their children (Shildrick et al, 2016). Being so detached from the labour market meant, as an example, that they had little access to the informal networks that we know can be important in getting jobs in working-class communities (MacDonald et al, 2005). Nor are we suggesting that all people would respond in the same way to the sorts of pressures faced in growing up here or that these conditions are so determining that they doom young adults to repeat the same troubled lives as their parents (see Shildrick et al, 2016). We *are* saying, however, that we think it is impossible to properly grasp the unusual severity and complexity of the troubles these families faced and enacted – and how these persisted over time and sometimes across generations – without understanding this shared and harmful social context.

Interview transcripts provided rich evidence about all of these negative pressures. For reasons of space, however, we have selected just one of them with which to elucidate our argument, with closest attention to the impact on one place; the negative effects of a drug economy on Parkhill.

### **‘Parkhill is a place where it is difficult to escape it’: the malign effects of drugs on the life of a neighbourhood**

The declining prosperity and reputation of the neighbourhood of Parkhill, Glasgow, has the failing local economy at its root (with the closure of mainstay employers in the 1960s and ‘70s, redundancy, unemployment, rising poverty and so on). But that economic and social decline has both *allowed* and *been pushed along* by a burgeoning local drug-crime economy, originally and still mainly centred on the sale and use of heroin. All ten of the Parkhill families told stories of the harm that heroin had caused to them and to their

neighbourhood. Heroin was implicated substantively (if sometimes indirectly) in all the explanations we gathered for how and why middle-aged interviewees here were so detached from the labour market.

To understand this – and to understand why the same was *not* true at all of our Middlesbrough families<sup>7</sup> – we need to know something about the history of drug markets in the UK (see Simpson et al, 2007) and how, at local level, they can become part of a lasting milieu of hardship and trouble.

In the UK in the mid-twentieth century heroin users were few in number, primarily based in London and often came from middle-class backgrounds (and included many who were GPs). From the 1980s onwards, however, heroin use became firmly established as a drug that affected working-class communities – particularly ones suffering poverty and high unemployment. The film *Trainspotting* (directed by Danny Boyle, 1996) captures exactly this process as it affected a depressed neighbourhood of Edinburgh in the 1980s. Howard Parker and colleagues (1998) have mapped ‘heroin outbreaks’ in the UK and how it arrived with dramatic, deleterious effects in places (such as Glasgow and Merseyside) which, until that point, had no experience of a significant heroin market. Rather than being middle-class professionals, these ‘new heroin users...were basically poor, undereducated, unemployed, ‘marginalised’ young men’ (Parker et al, 1988). In other words, the socio-demographic profile of these new heroin users, in places like Glasgow in the early 1980s, fitted very closely the profile of the people we recruited as representatives of the ‘parent generation’<sup>8</sup>. Now in their 40s and 50s, they had grown up in the period when heroin *first* impacted on their communities. Heroin, in this socio-demographic and temporal context, was a ‘poverty drug’ marketed to and needed by the already vulnerable and troubled (MacDonald and Marsh, 2002); a process that, at the neighbourhood level, speeded the decline of

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<sup>7</sup> To be clear, the Middlesbrough interviewees were aware of the negative impact of drug markets on their neighbourhoods, but these had not impacted on the *biographies* of these families in the same way as they had in Glasgow, as we explain later.

<sup>8</sup> Parker et al (1988) refer to ‘young men’ but, as we show, marginalised young women in Glasgow were not immune to the impact of heroin. There is not the space here, however, to describe how gender shaped different forms of engagement in the drug-crime economy.

economically marginal places and, at the individual level, entrapped people in long-term careers of 'problematic' drug use and crime.

These processes were writ large in our Parkhill interviews. Across all middle-generation interviewees only two had *never* had a job. Both were men from Parkhill with long-term histories of heroin use, addiction, offending, imprisonment and ill-health. One of these was Kenny Jamieson (48, Glasgow). He liked Parkhill when he was growing up but remembers when 'drugs arrived' in the 1980s:

It put everybody off [how they should be] ... see, before the drugs came in? You could go to anyone's house. The door was lying open. 'Til the rotten drugs came in. And now no cunt trusts nobody. Not anymore. I've had friends... dying and taking overdoses – but I've no friends now.

Dennis Martin (47, Glasgow) was the other. For reasons of convenience to the family, he was not interviewed alone but alongside his sister Claire (36) and his niece Leanne (17, Claire's daughter). The story this family told captured well the experiences of our Parkhill research participants. As a result of his long-term intravenous use of heroin, Douglas suffered chronic health problems (drug-induced psychosis and a serious heart condition, and he was unable to walk) and now received disability related benefits (as did Claire, also a long-term heroin user). Both were trying to desist from heroin use via a methadone maintenance programme.

Douglas recounted his biography with candour. Not particularly interested in school and left under-supervised by his grandparents after his parents split up, Douglas was a persistent truant, lured by the temptations of the street-based drug trade. Poorly educated and low qualified school-leavers like Douglas found opportunities to work in the informal, illegal economy to be more abundant, more lucrative and more enticing than those in the legitimate labour market (McAra and McVie, 2010). By 16 he was dealing, as well as using heroin:

*Douglas:* Did I look for a job? *The truth? No, I sold drugs ... just to keep my [drug] habit going. And I never bothered looking for work. And I never have*

done. And now, I couldn't work if I wanted [because of his drug-related disabilities].

*Leanne [niece, 17]:* But see, Uncle Douglas, see back at the start. Would you have worked if you had the choice?

*Douglas:* Aye, if I had the chance, the choice .... *Maybe, I don't know.* 'Cause I was taking drugs from thirteen so, and when I was sixteen I'd been on it three years... you get the money to feed your addiction...and then you've got a criminal record and then once you kind of get your head together, you've stopped taking drugs, you end up you can't get a job because you've messed your body up and messed your life up.

This pattern of problems at school (and truancy from it) meant that these men were often sent to Approved Schools. This action seemed to confirm a pathway towards long-term criminality and regular imprisonment, rather than divert them from it. Douglas estimated that over the years he had committed around 150 offences (mainly shop lifting), all to support his drug habit. He had spent several spells in prison. Douglas's story is typical of how, for this middle generation in Parkhill, problematic drug use usually started in the teenage years, encouraged acquisitive offending, and became associated with repeated imprisonment and, for most, long-term health problems.

The pattern described by Kenny, Douglas and others was not peculiar to men. June Fraser (44, Glasgow) told a very similar story of leaving school, a few short-term jobs or training schemes and then regular criminal enterprise (shop-lifting) to support her entrenched, dependent use of heroin. At 44, she had not been employed since 18, had several serious health problems (including impaired mobility, bowel problems and Hepatitis C), was on a methadone maintenance programme but still using heroin. Claire (36, Glasgow), Douglas Martin's sister, also narrated a life story in which drugs and crime had played a long-term and destructive part. She had not been a regular attendee at school, but immediately after leaving school she had had a few jobs. Now 36, she had not been employed since her late teens. Her partner at the time, and Leanne's father, was addicted to heroin and forced Claire to work as a prostitute in order to support his drug habit (receiving several convictions for soliciting). She started using heroin and quickly became addicted, also



eventually suffering long-term damage to her health. Claire – like her brother Douglas – was explicit, and remorseful, about the impact – the ‘pure madness’ - that drugs had on her life and on her family. In turn, Leanne (17) told the interviewer, and her mother and uncle, that she was adamant that she did not want to end up ‘vegetating’ like them. Nevertheless, she reported that she sometimes used drugs (unspecified) and that she had committed several offences when drunk. She wanted to get a job of some sort but was finding this difficult; she too had missed a lot of school and was largely unqualified. She also implied that, like her mother (Claire) and uncle (Douglas), she sometimes earned money by dealing drugs.

‘Heavy end’ heroin use of the sort described by the middle-generation was not common amongst the Parkhill young adults. More typical was a pattern of committed or ‘persistent use’ (Simpson, 2003) of so-called ‘recreational drugs’, such as cannabis, alongside heavy alcohol consumption. Mark McGinn (Glasgow, 18) was unemployed, supplementing his income with occasional drug dealing. He had around twenty convictions – all related to his excessive alcohol use. He filled his unemployed days in Parkhill with intoxication:

I wake up. Take a bucket [a technique for inhaling cannabis smoke]. A cigarette. Get a wash – by one o’clock I go down to *The Gunners* [a local pub]. I walk about, do whatever I’m doing. Get stoned. By now it’s five o’clock. Go back out. If I’m bored, I’ll get a drink; that’s me enjoying myself. Parkhill is a place where it is difficult to escape it, drugs and alcohol.

The vitality of the local drug economy is evident in the profusion of barber shops and hairdressers on the otherwise run-down, commercially failing high street of Parkhill. Locally these were understood to be fronts for the laundering of the profits from the illegal drugs trade. Liz Holland (64, Glasgow) commented: ‘there’s a lot of places opening – but its only for the money laundering; there’s no actual real jobs to be had’.

Kerry White (aged 31) deplored having to bring her children up in this environment. Heroin badly affected her own childhood and teenage years. Her parents were both long-term users and Kerry has been in local authority care for several periods. She missed a lot of

school and acted as an informal carer for her siblings, leaving school at 16 with no qualifications. Now, with young children of her own, and living in a neighbourhood of Parkhill known as the 'the Ghetto', Kerry strived to protect them from the risks of growing up in a place so negatively affected by drugs and crime. She said:

I hate bringing my weans [children] up here. It's a pure nightmare. When I left my partner, I ended up homeless and they put me here [in a council flat] ... They said: 'it is your one and only offer [of accommodation]'. It was a pure party den with menchies [graffiti] all over the walls. It had been peed in and everything. Windows all smashed. And I had to take my three weans in there and try and clean it up ... I take them [the children] to the clubs every day after school and try to keep them involved in the clubs, but it is so difficult ...

To repeat, *all* of the Glasgow families told stories of the destructive impact of heroin. So why did we not find the same thing amongst our East Kelby middle-aged interviewees?

What we know of these localities makes us confident that this is not a freak outcome of our sampling procedures. Rather, this is a function of the spatial and temporal patterning of drug markets in the UK in the post-war period. Middlesbrough provides an archetypal example of what Parker et al (1998) call 'a second wave' heroin outbreak. In other words, following the first wave outbreaks that hit places like Glasgow in the 1980s, a second wave impacted on communities, typically to the eastern side of the UK, in the mid-1990s. These were places that, until that point, had had no or a negligible 'heroin footprint'. As with the first wave, these new heroin markets were opened in socio-economically depressed localities with the drug traded to, and used by, young adults who were already experiencing forms of social exclusion and poverty (MacDonald and Marsh, 2002). In such a context, we know there is a typical age for the commencement of heroin-using drug careers (i.e. the later teenage years). Thus, our Middlesbrough 'parent generation' sample (in their 40s and 50s in the late 2000s) grew up in a period (roughly the late 1970s and 1980s) when there simply was no heroin market in Teesside. That social risk was void. Conversely, the Glasgow 'parent generation' passed through their teenage years at exactly the time the UK's first wave heroin outbreak was hitting. Their age, class, locality and their already marginalised

social and economic position gave optimum conditions for the onset of destructive careers of heroin use and crime.

Our general argument here is supported by UK government Home Office research (Morgan, 2014) that demonstrates how the rate of 'volume' acquisitive crime *in particular cities and regions* can be mapped against the long-term impact of heroin outbreaks via the aggregate numbers of 'problematic drug users' in those cities. The research did not include Scotland, but we can reasonably use Merseyside, also a first wave outbreak city, as a proxy for Glasgow. Between 1980 and 1999 the peak year for recorded burglary in Merseyside was 1986; for Cleveland – which contains Middlesbrough and typical of a second wave heroin outbreak - the peak year was 1995.

Scroll forward thirty years or so and we can see where these careers of drugs and crime can sometimes lead. At the time of writing, politicians and policy makers were responding to new data on Scotland's drugs-related deaths that showed that these had soared to their highest level ever, exceeding the rates for the UK as a whole, for all EU countries and even for the USA (BBC Scotland, 2019). More than two-thirds of drug-related deaths were of people aged between 35 and 54. As Leask (2016) has put it, it is not parents and grandparents that communities are losing to drugs, but young people. Dr Priyadarshi, of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde addiction services, explained that this high and rising rate was an outcome of Scotland's 'Trainspotting Generation'; an ageing population of mainly male 'problem drug users', who have been using heroin since the 1980s:

Biologically they are ageing much faster than their real age and they develop multiple morbidity, particularly around respiratory diseases, liver diseases and blood-borne viruses and this adds a further vulnerability with regards to overdose deaths (Priyadarshi, quoted on BBC Scotland 2019).

## **Conclusions**

It was a privilege to be able to undertake this research with these families in Glasgow and Middlesbrough. They told their individual and family stories with generosity and candour,

even though they contained much hardship and trouble. In the UK, in recent years, old ideas that blame people like them for their situation, that individualise poverty as a personal and family pathology, an outcome of choice and lifestyle, have been re-energised by a Government keen to drive along a programme of austerity. Massive cuts to social security spending are made easier – indeed, become popular with the electorate – when ‘we’ can tell ourselves that ‘the poor’ are not deserving, that indolent families unnecessarily ‘depend’ on ‘welfare’, that ‘a culture of worklessness’ passed down across generations explains unemployment and poverty. These underclass ideas have a long pedigree, recurring over centuries in new guises, but rarely can any social scientific substantiation be found for them. As Harkness et al’s recent review concluded (2012: 26), there is ‘little evidence of a culture of poverty in the UK’.

We could find none whatsoever. Even in the most fertile ground, it was impossible for us to locate families where ‘three generations had never worked’. And neither did the notion of a ‘culture of worklessness’ provide any leverage in understanding the circumstances and histories of the twenty very troubled and multi-deprived families that we interviewed. MacMillan’s survey analysis (2011) points to some evidence of a strong intergenerational correlation in the risk of unemployment between fathers and sons but notes that it is difficult to ascertain whether this is a ‘deprivation story’ or a ‘dependency story’. MacMillan means that this correlation could result from *either* a shared exposure to limited labour market opportunities *or* from a process of social learning in families in preference of welfare benefits.

The evidence and argument in this paper strongly favours the ‘deprivation story’ – and provides, we think, some original theorisation and close empirical detail of how this plays out for working-class families over decades. We are *not* suggesting, however, that this was a simple story of being deprived of job opportunities. To be clear, an assessment of the prevailing structure of opportunities is *necessary* for any successful study of youth transitions. This was the approach favoured by Andy Furlong over the years and it is one with which we whole-heartedly agree. In this empirical case, however, this is not a *sufficient* analysis; it oversimplifies the unusual, extreme and complex stories we have been describing. As with other scholars, Andy Furlong (2012) also emphasised how one of the

particular strengths of youth sociology is to provide a window on processes whereby inequality is reproduced anew over time. We suggest that our study here – with its focus on biographies of families over generations - has *exactly* that theoretical advantage. Prompted by a poignant hint from an interview with a family in Glasgow, and by an underdeveloped idea in Rutter and Madge’s famous *Cycles of Disadvantage*, we have argued that the persistence of poverty and other troubles in these families over generations was *not* the outcome of intra-familial processes of cultural inheritance but, in part, the effect an adverse, ‘common social environment’ (Rutter and Madge, 1976: 5) that constrained opportunities and reduced chances for betterment for working-class families living in some of the most deprived and marginalised of places. We identified a set of conditions or factors that made up a semi-permanent *constellation of external socio-economic pressures* that bore down on successive generations of these families over decades. From these we chose one – the negative effects of a local drug-crime market - to demonstrate our argument. We used interview material from Parkhill for this.

To conclude, we make two final points. The sociological meaning and effects of drug use depend far more on the social context of use than on drug pharmacology. For marginalised working-class populations in Parkhill (from the mid-1980s) and East Kelby (from the mid-1990s) heroin had devastating, long-term effects on the biographies of individuals, families and neighbourhoods. Particularly in the Parkhill interviews (as we explained earlier), heroin use was wrapped up in life stories of offending, addiction, violence, imprisonment, unemployment, poverty, family break up, chronic ill-health and premature death. As MacDonald and Marsh (2002) argued from earlier research on Teesside, it is difficult to understand the appeal, use and spread of heroin in the UK’s impoverished working-class communities (particularly amongst socially excluded young adults) without understanding the wider context of marginalisation and troubles faced by these users. This would appear to be equally true for young adults growing up in Parkhill in Glasgow in the early 1980s and in East Kelby in Middlesbrough in the mid-1990s.

Our second and final point returns us to our main thesis. The effects of the 1980s ‘heroin outbreak’ on the lives of families in Parkhill proves, we suggest, that we cannot hope to theorise the hardship and troubles of these families independently of an understanding of

the malign social context they faced over time. The awful stories of addiction, loss and harm told by Douglas, Kerry and others simply do not make sense as stories of intra-family learning or inter-generational cultural dysfunction (see MacDonald et al, 2013); they must be comprehended in relation to the risks of *local* drug markets<sup>9</sup>. Remember we were unable to gather *any* such stories from our middle-generation Middlesbrough interviewees. This is directly explicable via the history and geography of UK heroin outbreaks and markets in the post-war period. Thus, we can see evidence for the power of a negative social environment on the lives of these families (and, therefore, for the power of our thesis) in this abundance of ‘heroin stories’ from middle-generation interviewees in Glasgow and their complete absence with the same age group in Middlesbrough, in the distinctly different timing of peaks in acquisitive, drug-related crime between the two localities and, even more wretchedly, in the soaring rate of premature, drug-related deaths for older men in Scotland, ‘the Trainspotting Generation’.

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<sup>9</sup> Meaning that we theorise ‘common social environments’ as potentially having significant socio-graphic variation.

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