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Research article

'Press-ganged' Generation Rent: youth homelessness, precarity and poverty in East London

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Abstract

This paper examines youth homelessness, precarity and poverty via a critical account of 'Generation Rent' – that young people are living in the private rental sector (PRS) in perpetuity having been locked out of both homeownership and social renting. The paper examines precarity in relation to employment (non-standard contracts) and housing (insecurity and evictions) with reference to in-depth interviews undertaken with 55 young people aged 18-30. This multi-ethnic group of low-income youth were living in temporary accommodation either in East London or in South East England having been displaced there from London. The paper illustrates the interlinkages between employment and housing precarity. The young people experienced the 'low-pay, no-pay cycle' which contributed towards making the expensive London PRS an insecure and unrealistic housing 'option'. Their preferred housing was social renting, but access to this diminished due to austerity-related welfare cutbacks. Despite the young people's well-founded antipathy towards the PRS, they were increasingly being steered towards this tenure destination by housing officials – a case of coerced, 'press-ganged' Generation Rent.

Keywords: Displacement, evictions, Generation Rent, youth homelessness, precarity, private renting.

Introduction

For most of the post-War period, the UK private rental sector (PRS) was regarded as a 'transitional tenure' which primarily catered for young people before they moved into either owner occupation or social housing, i.e. the two 'tenures of destination' (Ineichen, 1981; Kemp and Keoghan, 2001). By contrast, the post-crash period has witnessed a profound transformation in young people's tenure expectations and experiences such that homeownership has become an impossible dream for many and represents a 'fallacy of choice' (McKee et al., 2017b). Social renting has also become increasingly out-of-reach as it has continued its long-term decline under forty years of neoliberalism, a decline which has been exacerbated by the last decade of punitive austerity welfare

retrenchment (Cooper and Whyte, 2017; Minton, 2017; Hodkinson, 2019). Rather than being a transitional tenure for young people embarking on their housing careers, the PRS has become their *de facto* tenure of destination, hence giving rise to the influential notion of 'Generation Rent' (Cole et al., 2016; McKee et al., 2017a, 2017b, 2019). This paper critically examines the notion of Generation Rent by focussing on low-income, homeless youth in London in relation to employment and housing precarity.

Generation Rent and precarity

McKee et al. (2019: 2) have criticised the existing literature on Generation Rent for treating it 'as an undifferentiated mass' in that *intra-generational inequalities* of class, race and gender have received insufficient attention. With this criticism in mind, this paper addresses four distinct, albeit to some extent overlapping gaps/limitations regarding the Generation Rent literature.

Although some research is available (McKee et al., 2017a; Mayock and Parker, 2019), the first gap refers to the impacts of recent housing transformations on working-class youth in general and *low-income youth* in particular: 'an explicit focus on low-income groups is crucial, for they are experiencing these shifts in the housing tenure structure most acutely' (McKee et al., 2019: 14). Although Hardgrove et al. (2015) note the significance of precarious housing in their analysis of working-class male youth labour market precarity, their housing analysis is limited and tends to focus on family support issues. The second gap relates to how the Generation Rent literature has focused on exclusion from homeownership *rather than social housing* (McKee et al., 2019). The implicit 'either renting or owning' binary partly reflects how social housing has limited significance in parts of the UK (McKee et al., 2017a). Nevertheless, social housing – which largely meant local authority 'council housing' up until the 1980s – played a significant role in young working-class people's housing transitions during the post-war period (Ineichen, 1981). This role requires acknowledging and updating for the post-crash period.

The third gap is inadequate recognition of *the geography* of Generation Rent (McKee et al., 2017a). Although the current UK housing crisis – high levels of homelessness, long social housing waiting lists, unaffordable house prices and private rents – is nationwide, its undoubted epicentre is London. London is subject to intense housing market pressures due to its role in property-related global capital flows which manifest themselves in gentrification in many parts of the city including 'regenerated' East London (Bernstock, 2014; Minton, 2017; Watt, 2013). Furthermore – and linking up the first two gaps above – London had a large council housing sector for much of the post-war period which was central to working-class housing experiences and social reproduction (Hamnett, 2003; Watt, 2006; Hodkinson, 2019). Housing independence for the city's working-class youth meant obtaining a council tenancy, albeit that this process was by no means equitable or unproblematic especially for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups and single young people (Jackson, 2012; Glynn, 2014). Following the Housing Act 1977, entry to social housing has increasingly come via the homelessness/temporary accommodation route (Watt, 2018a, 2018b). The fourth gap is how there needs to be greater examination of the inter-relationship between youth homelessness and the PRS, not least since evictions from the latter are now the major cause of homelessness in London (Watt, 2018a, 2018b).

Youth housing transitions cannot be understood in isolation from other youth transitions and experiences, notably those related to employment and austerity-related welfare restructuring and cutbacks (Cole et al., 2016; McKee et al., 2017a; 2017b; Mayock and Parker, 2019). Hence, growing housing precarity – signified by insecurity

and evictions – needs to be understood in relation to increased labour market precarity (Standing, 2011). Wage-labour contracts are less likely to take the standard full-time employment form, but are increasingly non-standard encompassing temporary, casual and part-time employment, and self-employment (Shildrick et al., 2012; MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019). As with housing precarity, all forms of employment precarity bear down heaviest on youth; 'If you are young and in employment in the UK, you are far more likely to be on a "zero-hours contract" than another form of employment contract' (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019: 10).

Context and methods

The research context is East London, a sub-region that has witnessed profound changes during the last fifty years. It suffered from the closure of the docks and deindustrialisation during the 1960-80s which have left an enduring legacy of poverty, deprivation and hardship among the area's working-class population (Hobbs, 1988; Hamnett, 2003; Watt, 2013). Such disadvantages are also racialised since they are especially prominent among BAME East Londoners (Gunter and Watt, 2009; Qureshi et al, 2014). East London has also been one of the UK's major laboratories for urban regeneration including the 1980s' redevelopment of London Docklands and the staging of the 2012 Olympic Games (Hamnett, 2003; Bernstock, 2014). These large-scale regeneration programmes have radically transformed the area's physical appearance. What is doubtful, however, is whether such regeneration has benefitted East London's multi-ethnic working-class population either in terms of employment (Hamnett, 2003; Vadiati, 2020) or housing (Bernstock, 2014; Watt, 2013). Regeneration has instead taken a 'state-led gentrification' form whose primary beneficiaries are incoming, affluent, high-skilled residents and workforces rather than poor East Londoners (Watt, 2013; Vadiati, 2020).

The gap between policy aspirations and outcomes in East London is especially pronounced in the housing field where homelessness and overcrowding have worsened while house prices and private rents have risen to unaffordable levels due, at least in part, to regeneration (Watt, 2013; Bernstock, 2014; Hardy and Gillespie, 2016; Minton, 2017; Collinson, 2019). While regeneration has resulted in some new social housing this has been extremely limited and has furthermore not gone to those most in housing need (Watt and Bernstock, 2017). This can be seen in the case of the Olympics 'East Village' which, as Humphry (2019) argues, is linked to how Newham Council enthusiastically embraced the 2011 Localism Act in order to change its social housing allocations' policy to prioritise the 'deserving poor' – those in work, the disabled and former armed-forces. By contrast, the housing needs of the unemployed and lone parents caring for children – the 'undeserving poor' – have been downgraded (Watt, 2018a).

This paper is based on qualitative research with low-income East London youth from 2011-18, i.e. largely prior to the rollout of Universal Credit. In-depth interviews were undertaken with 55 young people (aged 18-30) living in temporary accommodation, either in East London or outside the city having been relocated there by East London local authorities. Fifty interviewees came from Newham, a London borough with extreme homelessness and overcrowding problems plus social housing shortages (Bernstock, 2014; Hardy and Gillespie, 2016). Forty-four (24 males and 20 females) were residents of the 'Hostel' – a large supported housing unit which provided temporary accommodation for over 200 young people in Newham; see Kennelly (2016) and Watt and Bernstock (2017) for further details. As well as providing accommodation, the Hostel operated a supportive regime in terms of housing, education, training and employment assistance, while it also had a mother-and-baby unit where six female interviewees lived

with their small children. Another three female interviewees (either pregnant or with small children) were living elsewhere in Newham. The remaining eight interviewees were female residents/ex-residents of a small block of flats – the 'Block' – in Welwyn Garden City, a small town about 25 miles north of London; see Watt (2018a, 2018b) for further details. Seven of the women were lone mothers and one was pregnant. Several London councils leased flats in the Block from the private owner in order to provide temporary accommodation for their homeless households. Three Block interviewees came from Newham, four from Waltham Forest, and one from Tower Hamlets.

The young people largely came from working-class backgrounds. Most had been brought up in London, although six were recent migrants to the UK. The majority of born-and-bred Londoners had lived with their parents or carers in social housing – mainly council but also housing association renting – indicative of the important role that such housing has played in the social reproduction of the city's working class (Hodkinson, 2019). Unlike middle-class youth, they were extremely unlikely to receive inter-generational financial assistance or housing support due to their parents' own limited resources (Qureshi et al., 2014). Many of the youth also experienced vulnerability due to being lone parents or pregnant, suffering from mental illness or from the threat of violence.

Over 70 per cent of interviewees were from BAME backgrounds (mainly black British/African/Caribbean rather than South Asian), indicative of the racialised character of both urban housing precarity and London's housing crisis. The remainder were mainly white British with a few white Europeans. Educational qualifications tended to be limited to GCSEs, although there were a couple of graduates while others were attending (or planning to attend) university. The young people had all engaged in work-related training – often on multiple occasions – and this is indicative of how they had no in-principle antipathy towards paid work. Most had been living in the parental/carers' home before they became homeless, although a minority had been living independently either alone or with a partner. Domestic disputes and breakdowns often precipitated their decision to apply as homeless, although overcrowding – which is prominent among East London BAME households – also underpinned such family tensions (Watt, 2018a).

The young people were only supposed to stay at the Hostel for two years, but problems in finding independent accommodation meant that many stayed much longer. The Hostel interviewees had been living in temporary accommodation for periods ranging from a few days to four and a half years, with 80 per cent living there for 12 months or longer and nearly 40 per cent for two years or longer. Such lengthy time periods reflect the increasingly elongated nature of so-called 'temporary accommodation' in contemporary London (Watt, 2018b). In the early years of research at the Hostel, various schemes were in place to support the youth in obtaining independent housing. These included a scheme in which the Hostel had 'nomination rights' (with the local council and housing association landlords) to around 15-20 social tenancies per year, and 'bond schemes' whereby the council paid the deposit on PRS accommodation. However, austerity cuts led to the shrinkage of these schemes by 2013-14, and the eventual closure of the Hostel as a dedicated youth facility in 2016 (Watt and Bernstock, 2017; Watt, 2018b).

Employment precarity: 'it's not solid work'

The low-pay, no-pay cycle

At the time of the interviews, only six of the young people were in paid work; most were unemployed, in education or training, looking after their children, or were pregnant.

However, the in-depth nature of the interviews revealed that only around one seventh of the young East Londoners had never had a paid job. This contrasts with marginalised youth in less economically buoyant parts of the UK where lack of work experience is more prevalent (Carlin, 2019; McKee et al., 2017a).

Rather than permanent exclusion from paid work, the young East Londoners' working lives were dominated by precarity associated with the 'low-pay, no-pay' cycle – 'a longitudinal pattern of employment instability and movement between low-paid jobs and unemployment, usually accompanied by claiming of welfare benefits' (Shildrick, et al., 2012). They held a series of low-paying jobs interspersed with periods of unemployment as well as unpaid voluntary work and training. For example, Amran (female, 23, black British) described her retail, caring and estate agency experience.

"With PS [discount retail store], I was at school so I worked there at the weekends and stuff like that. With the care homes, I was volunteering for a year in the same place and then I worked six months for them part time because I was in college. With estate agents it was full-time, but I couldn't complete because I got pregnant at that time, and then I had to stop. So it's only recently that I've actually not done anything because I've been pregnant and obviously giving birth."

The youth worked in a variety of private-sector, non-unionised service jobs in retail (checkout, shelf stacking), care sector (nurseries, playgroups), cleaning, hairdressing security, bar/club work, construction and administration. This work was characterised by poverty-level wages and precarity (Standing, 2011; Shildrick et al., 2012; MacDonald and Giazizoglu, 2019). Earnings were typically between £5.00-8.00 per hour with most being paid at or slightly above the National Minimum Wage (NMW) level. Faith (female, 22, black British) had worked at several major high street retail stores and said her wage 'depends' – 'if you're got experience it's normally around about £6-something, but most of them, some are quite Minimum Wage, £5-something'. Part-time employment was prevalent; very few had standard full-time, permanent work experience. After graduation, Olu (male, 24, black African) supplemented his earnings as a part-time sales assistant at an East London retail store with agency work. He left the agency because of the difficulties in doing two jobs, but then his retail hours were subsequently cut down to six hours per week. Due to such low hours, Olu left the store and then got another retail job for 16 hours per week on an hourly rate of £6.60. Although Olu worked more hours, he still could not realistically contemplate renting in the East London PRS: '16 hours a week can't get you nothing'.

Employment precarity was manifest in various ways, including redundancy – being 'let go' – which was easy for employers to do given that the young people were working on non-standard contracts with limited employment rights. They were typically employed for short-term periods – either on a temporary basis for a fixed, pre-defined period, or on a casual, intermittent and unpredictable basis. Precarity was a defining characteristic of the Olympics-related jobs, all of which were temporary. Amran was initially pleased that the Olympics came to East London. She volunteered at the Games' venues and then obtained a catering job: 'I worked day and night because I was so excited, I was handling food and stuff'. Given her enthusiasm, she was disappointed that the job was terminated once the Games ended.

Casual employment meant being employed on uneven working patterns with no guarantee of paid hours; this included both agency work and zero-hours contracts. Scott (male, 23, white British) had extensive manual work experience (p. 134) largely obtained via employment agencies which involved working for periods ranging from a few days to a few months: 'it's agency innit, do you know what I mean, it's not solid work'.

This casual 'as and when' employment meant that wages fluctuated from week-to-week. Jack (male, 19, black British) worked as an administrative assistant at a large entertainments' arena on a casual basis when events were being held. Consequently his hours and earnings (£7.50 per hour) varied wildly: 'like last weekend I did 32 hours in two days, and the week after that I had one day of work which was seven hours, so I clock up maybe 54 hours a week one week and then the next week do 20, do 10 to 5, it's as and when'. Such inherent precarity, plus the fact that there were hardly any events during the summer months, meant that 'it's left me in a situation where I need to go and make other arrangements, because I will be poor and I won't have any money to pay rent' (Jack). Consequently, Jack tried to shore up his earnings by enrolling on a lifeguard course which he funded himself. This resulted in his gaining a lifeguard position, which he was pleased about even though it was also casual and paid even less at £6.25 per hour. Jack was, however, optimistic regarding his future since he expected to go university, while he also thought that, 'two casual contracts might help make a full-time job'. As Standing (2011) makes clear, two such contracts do not 'add up' to full-time work since all the standard employment conditions (protection, sick pay, pensions, etc.) do not exist under temporary and casual contracts.

Working informally off-the-books has been a long-term feature of the East London economy (Hobbs, 1988), and persists among young men (Gunter and Watt, 2009). Several interviewees had worked in 'fiddly jobs' on an informal cash-in-hand basis (MacDonald and Giazitzoglu, 2019). Hamid (male, 22, South Asian) described doing various 'one-day jobs': 'they [company] used to call me and just tell me 'come', it would be like a couple of hours, whatever it is'.

Given their low-paid precarious work, it is unsurprising that the young people struggled to make ends meet in terms of paying their rent, bills and food. Despite having subsidised rents at the Hostel, several had accumulated rent arrears. Although those in paid formal work tended to be financially better off than those claiming out-of-work benefits, the difference between earnings (supplemented with in-work benefits) and benefits-only income was often marginal once travel-to-work costs and Housing Benefit changes were taken into account (Smith, 2005). The marginal nature of the earning/benefits gap – and the insecurities involved in gaining work and signing on and off benefits – prompted the young people to leave jobs because they were getting into financial difficulties. Ashanti (female, 19, mixed ethnicity) had worked as a door-to-door/telephone sales' person at a marketing company for three months.

"Because it was self-employed, obviously I wasn't in the best position because I wasn't sure what my income was going to be and then obviously Housing Benefit, it was more draining my pocket than having a little profit and being able to cope with bills, so I just had to stop that."

'Taking advantage': low pay plus no pay

The 'low-pay/no-pay cycle' (Shildrick et al., 2012) certainly applied to East London youth. They also described various ways that employers 'took advantage' over-and-above standard wage-labour exploitation. This involved *not being paid* for de facto working notably because companies classified them as 'trainees' rather than as 'employees'. Richard (male, 25, black British) worked for over nine months at a construction company, partly as a trainee but partly as a worker: 'we done paving, bricklaying, manholes, walls, drains, you name it. It's like a variety of things, plastering, painting, decorating, we learned a lot of skills'. However, he described being 'used' by the company since 'sometimes we didn't get paid'. The company went bust before he was able to obtain the relevant training qualification: 'it got me fed up'.

Employers took advantage of young people who were vulnerable due to age and/or migrant status. Caitlin (female, 18, white British) had worked for a year at the age of 16-17 in a private East London nursery looking after small children, for which she earned '£425 a month for doing ten hours a day, five days a week, with six two-year-olds in one room'. As Caitlin explained, her employer was able to pay her just over £2.00 per hour, because she was classified as an 'Apprentice' which incurs a lower NMW rate. This so-called 'apprenticeship' involved Caitlin going to college for one day a month, while the other 20+ days a month she worked in the nursery. As she wryly commented, 'that's how they [company] managed to get away with it because they employ young people'.

Despite living in the UK for several years, Molly's (female, 30, black Caribbean) citizenship/migration status was officially queried due to a legal error which meant that she was not formally entitled to work. Her mother was herself in low-paid employment, so Molly decided to help the family finances by working cash-in-hand at a club in the East London night-time economy in Shoreditch. Molly worked there for two years, but 'he [manager] took advantage because he knew that I wasn't working legally, so he used to make me work and then say he would pay me Friday, and then he wouldn't want to pay me and then he'd only pay me little bits'. The job was initially supposed to be a cloakroom attendant position, but the manager later wanted Molly to clean, help out in the kitchen, etc. so 'I was doing a whole lot of stuff that he wasn't paying me for, you know how people kind of take advantage when you're in a vulnerable situation, it's one of them ones and I was young'.

Gendered jobs and precarity

Aspects of traditional gender divisions of paid labour were evident (Kennelly, 2016). Whereas the low-paid caring and hairdressing jobs were done by the young women, the young men monopolised the manual jobs in construction, transportation and manufacturing which also tended to have the highest hourly wage rates – up to £11.00. In addition to working at Tate & Lyle, one of the few remaining factories left in post-industrial Newham, Scott described his extensive manual work experience.

"Even though I haven't got no qualifications, I've done everything. I've done cavity-wall installation, I've done cherry-picker driving, scissor-lift driving. I done painting and decorating, I done demolition, I've done high maintenance ... what else have I done? I've done loads of stuff man, I've done a bit of bricklaying, a bit of plastering. I did the Olympics as well, running cables, plugging up generators."

Such 'grafting' jobs remain attractive to working-class male youth, partly because they are better-paid, but also because they facilitate a display of traditional masculine prowess in doing such physical 'hard labour' work of the type that used to abound in East London (Hobbs, 1988; Gunter and Watt, 2009).

Job terminations were also gendered. Women employed on a casual basis have lower maternity rights, even though they have nominal legal protection against discrimination due to pregnancy or motherhood. Nevertheless, nearly all the 17 females with children mentioned how being pregnant resulted in the termination of their paid work. Angelica (female, 21, black British) worked part-time in a pub but struggled to make all her shifts after becoming pregnant. At one point the manager threatened her with a disciplinary notice despite the fact that she 'always called them' in advance when she could not meet her shifts: 'it's not like they lost out because if I didn't work I didn't get paid, so it wasn't like "oh I had a whole salary and then if I didn't work I still get paid my sick days" – my sick days, I don't get paid'.

Had the young women been on standard employee contracts, which professional women take for granted, they would have had firmer maternity rights. Two lone mothers were lucky and had full-time jobs which incorporated maternity leave. Ashley (female, 23, white British) worked as an administrator in a finance company who had 'said to me that they would give me a job that worked around childcare hours'. This guarantee enabled Ashley to plan to rent her own flat in the PRS after her baby was born, rather than stay with her parents where relations were becoming strained. All these plans went awry because Ashley was made redundant shortly after she returned to work which then resulted in her becoming homeless.

Housing precarity: 'there's no level of security'

So far, I have illustrated how precarious, poor work was endemic and suggested how this fed through into housing problems including rendering the PRS an unrealistic 'option'. Turning to housing in detail, I now examine the young people's housing histories. These histories were characterised by extensive and intensive precarity involving chronic insecurity alongside repeated forced moves – aka 'recurrent displacement' (Watt, 2018b). Such precarity manifested itself in sofa surfing, rough sleeping, and living in temporary accommodation and the PRS both of which involved having to move from one place to another due to short-term lettings and evictions.

Sofa surfing and rough sleeping

While many of the interviewees went straight from living in the family home to living in temporary accommodation, around half had spent anywhere between a few weeks to a few years moving from one desperate homeless situation to another, typically 'sofa surfing' at friends and relatives. Scott left the family home at the age of 16 and then spent three years zigzagging between his friends' homes with occasional periods spent back at his mum's house.

"Yeah, jumping sofas and that, from sofa to sofa. I'd stay anywhere I would, as long as I had a little roof over my head. I was homeless, I didn't have nowhere to live, I overstayed my welcome at my family's and friends' houses, everywhere. And even my friends were saying, 'come on, like, it's too much now, you have to go'. I didn't have nowhere to go, do you know what I'm saying? So this [Hostel] was my very last choice."

Similar stories of dependence upon friends' and families' exhaustible supplies of goodwill were commonplace. Such precarity proved especially difficult for the young women who were no longer living in the parental home. When she was pregnant, Caitlin had been staying at friends, but 'they're with their parents and I was getting in the way'. Although Caitlin put a brave face on her homeless experiences – 'It was hard but I managed to get through it' – her story illustrates the manifest failures of the post-crash welfare system in meeting young people's housing and health needs.

"There was only two or three times where I didn't have somewhere to stay. I would be on the bus the whole night and not sleep because I was scared. I was seven months pregnant. I was more worried about something happening while I'm pregnant for the baby's sake, and I was quite ill through my pregnancy as well, so that didn't help."

While Jackson (2012) has noted how homeless workers in London advise young people to 'stay on the buses tonight' as a means of keeping relatively safe, such 'mobility tactics' for a young pregnant woman reflect direst unmet need. Because of her poor health, Caitlin was admitted to hospital several times when she was pregnant, and this ironically helped her out shelter-wise because it meant that at least she had a bed for the night.

A few of the young men slept rough including in parks and public spaces. Freddie (male, 20, white British) slept in a car park for six weeks and while he recounted this experience with a certain degree of macho bravado, he also acknowledged the strain it had placed him under: 'I'm only 20, it's a lot to go through innit?'

Private renting experiences and expectations

Only a minority of the young people had direct experience of living in the PRS, although others had unsuccessfully applied for private rooms or flats. Those who entered the PRS later exited it because of evictions, being unable to pay the rent or relationship breakdowns. Such churning reflects a combination of inherent PRS insecurities, Housing Benefit 'reforms', and their labour market precarity. Rochelle (female, 20, white southern European) had been evicted from her flat in Newham because 'the house contract is over and she [landlord] say everybody need to come away from the house'. When he moved to London, Jourds (male, 21, black Caribbean) initially relied upon sofa surfing at friends' houses. Upon obtaining a security job as part of the 2012 Olympic Games, he rented a room privately. However, Jourds was made redundant, alongside many other Olympics' security workers, and was subsequently evicted because his landlord did not accept tenants on benefits. Thus, while the PRS became realistically accessible if the young person had a moderately well-paying job, employment precarity rendered it highly contingent in practice.

When I asked the interviewees about their future housing expectations, they expressed similar opinions regarding private renting – that it was a form of housing that they would prefer not to live in. Such antipathy can be seen in Angelica's account of renting privately when she had been working.

"I was like 'if I work this many hours a week and I was putting my money aside, I'd like pay my rent but have £20 to my name, that's like no travel, no food'. Because you pay your rent and the bills are not included, and it is not even like a one-bedroom place, you are flat sharing and most of them [landlords] say 'no kids, no pets, no blah, blah, blah'. So I am just like 'well I can't do it'. And most of them [landlords] were saying 'no DSS', which is no Housing Benefit. So even after a certain point where I can't work anymore, they won't accept my Housing Benefit so therefore I'd be on the street, so there wasn't really a point in private renting to be honest, it's too expensive."

Angelica's concerns and experiences are far from exaggerated. They are an all-too-realistic reflection of the manifold inadequacies of private renting from the standpoint of low-income London youth. The young people's antipathy towards the PRS encompassed its insecurity, lack of affordability, the detrimental impact of Housing Benefit changes, and poor housing conditions. Tehuti (male, 24, black African) described the ubiquitous reputation of the PRS – 'there's no level of security'. The young people themselves had a remarkably realistic assessment of their incapacity to sustain a PRS tenancy given the kind of precarious NMW jobs they had had in the past and were likely to have in the future (Mayock and Parker, 2019).

"... myself personally I would rather get a council flat and pay rent in that way. But private renting, I don't think it will be an option for me. If I know I am just doing a normal job it wouldn't be an option, because I know that, say if I lost that job I am going to be out of the house as well." (Ashanti)

The young people's trepidation regarding potential eviction from the PRS was compounded by how their friends had been evicted for alleged rent non-payment: 'I don't trust private, not one bit, it's dodgy' (Scott). In terms of affordability, East London rents increased due to regeneration and gentrification: 'prices and everything went up [due to the Olympics], house prices, rent, the cost of living here is ridiculous now' (Richard). Constanca (female, 22, black British) described how the Hostel was her only option of independent living because of high rents plus exorbitant upfront costs.

"I had a look at quite a lot [places to rent]. Actually, I went through quite a few lettings agencies and stuff. Even if you can get a job and manage to pay rent, you have to have like a lump sum of £2,000 for like the deposit on a flat, and then you have to have six weeks' rent in advance and stuff like that, and so they ask for quite a lot, they don't just go like 'oh yeah move in, that's fine'."

Housing Benefit reforms compounded PRS problems (Minton, 2017). Private landlords increasingly do not take people on benefits ('no DSS'), especially in London (Cole et al., 2016). The Local Housing Allowance (LHA) cap restricted young people's capacity to enter and remain in the PRS. Hannah (female, 26, black British) had worked full-time in retail, but became ill which resulted in her hours being reduced, 'and then I couldn't afford it [rent] anymore'. The LHA cap meant that she was pressurised into leaving her private room: 'the rent was like £400 and even if I applied for DSS they wouldn't have paid the full amount, and that is how I ended up in the Hostel'. Even if landlords accepted Housing Benefit/LHA claimants, the squalid conditions in the lower-end of the city's PRS put the youth off: 'most of the ones that do accept DSS aren't good enough, they're basically rundown, not well looked after, not well-maintained properties, so it makes you feel bad as well' (Olu).

Going back home or private renting?

The social housing nomination scheme at the Hostel was greatly appreciated for offering a route out of housing precarity: 'I've been here this long, I'm not leaving without a council property' (Jack). Competition for nominations was fierce, partly because they were limited in number and because social renting was both secure and affordable in stark contrast to the PRS. In the context of discussing why the PRS was unsuitable, Olu stated 'that's why people [at the Hostel] are always fighting for a council property'. Jessica was coming up to the end of her nominal two-year tenancy and, like many others, expressed 'displacement anxiety' (Watt, 2018b): 'it's like so many people are just holding on to the flat here just because they're scared' of potential eviction. As mentioned above, austerity cutbacks resulted in the social housing nominations reducing and then ceasing altogether, while the Hostel itself eventually closed resulting in widespread evictions. As the Hostel's funding and staff were reduced, so its governmental regime shifted from a predominantly supportive ethos to a more punitive one. The lack of nominations and accumulating evictions caused considerable confusion, uncertainty and anxiety among the remaining residents as they faced the prospect of displacement.

The later interviewees, including those at the Block, were left with the sole remote prospect of obtaining a social tenancy via 'bidding' in the councils' choice-based letting scheme. This remote prospect had worsened for two reasons associated with austerity. First, the supply of social housing was negatively impacted by central government cuts

to housebuilding subsidies. Second, that despite the young people's previous work experience, they were on the wrong side of the councils' reprioritisation of their social housing allocations which favoured those applicants *currently in paid work* (Humphry, 2019). As predominantly (current) non-workers – unemployed and lone mothers – these low-income youth were pushed down the waiting list given their newly-labelled 'undeserving' status. This had a notable gendered impact vis-à-vis lone mothers who – as discussed above – had already been disadvantaged due to employment precarity arising from their lack of decent maternity rights (Watt, 2018a). These mothers were painfully aware of the prominent stigmatising mass media stereotype – that young women 'like them' 'became pregnant in order to obtain a council flat' (Daniel, 2016). They challenged this stereotype because it bore no relation to their own precarious journeys through the London housing welfare 'support' system: 'it really isn't worth it because there's no council flats available so you're not going to get a council flat, you're just going to get more stress' (Angelica).

As the young people's chances of obtaining a social tenancy withered, the various housing agencies began steering them in two alternative directions. The first direction was backwards – to return to the parental home – which was often difficult, if not impossible, due to overcrowding: 'they [housing officials] will try and make me go back to my mum's, but she's really overcrowded, there's my mum, my step-dad, my sister, my brother, his girlfriend and their baby' [living in a 3-bedroom council house] (Adriana, female, 23, black British).

The second direction was 'forwards' into the PRS. This direction was encouraged by the fact that the 2011 Localism Act allowed councils to discharge their rehousing obligations via the PRS. The LHA cap also meant that moving into the PRS (as well as into private-sector leased temporary accommodation such as the Block) increasingly meant being displaced from London altogether (Watt, 2018a, 2018b). Hannah left the Hostel before it closed and described how social housing was no longer part of any offer for her or her fellow remaining residents. Private renting was the only 'available' housing but this could mean leaving London: 'everything was private, everyone was offered away from their borough, like from Newham, everyone was offered maybe Clacton-on-Sea, Southend, except one person that was offered near Hackney'. This PRS 'option' rendered the young people's homeless application meaningless in their eyes: 'why would I come to the council to get a private sector which I can just go to any agency and sign up and get everything myself?' (Jade, female, 26, black British).

Given the young people's own well-founded objections towards private renting, such steering and pressure by officials towards the PRS is not merely a matter of Generation Rent having a 'fallacy of choice' (McKee, 2017b). It reflects instead the underlying punitive nature of austerity (Cooper and Whyte, 2017), and as such represents how low-income youth have become a coerced, 'press-ganged' Generation Rent. Although a few resigned themselves to leaving their home boroughs and London altogether (including having complex personal reasons for doing so), most resented such displacement and were often deeply cynical about the changes occurring in East London: 'I think it's all about social cleansing to try and get those people who cannot afford to live in London to move out of London, that's what's happening. A lot of people have moved to Birmingham, Southend, Kent, Hastings' (Aaron, male, 21, mixed ethnicity).

The Block in Welwyn Garden City

The end point of the young people's housing and employment precarity pathways was displacement outside of London altogether to places like the Block in Welwyn Garden City (Watt, 2018a, 2018b). Their studio flats in the Block were tiny and in several cases infested and damp: 'my children are thinking that a box is a home' (Rhianna, female, 25,

black British); 'I've got mould and damp because of hanging wet clothes in the [single] room' (Naomi, female, 25, black British). Living there and being displaced away from their London-based support networks negatively affected the lone mothers in myriad ways, notably in terms of isolation and poor health (physical and mental) for both them and their children; 'everyone's so isolated and scared here' (Fahima, female, 26, South Asian). Not only did the Block residents despair at their limbo status, but they expressed what Cooper and Whyte (2017) call the 'violence of austerity' in how they were being punished for a crime they did not commit – 'they're treating us like we've done something wrong' (Naomi). Obtaining a social tenancy was extremely difficult and was also presented as unrealistic by housing officials who instead directed the young people towards the PRS: 'I was told I'd be here a couple of months and it's now two and half years and they're [housing officials] saying "there's nothing we can do". They simply say, "you have to find your own place in private renting"' (Rhianna).

Some of the young women mentioned having to leave their education or jobs in London due to expense and travel issues, but also *being advised* to leave their jobs by housing officials: "My work is in London" – "don't worry, you won't be here for long". They told me to quit [my job], what could I say? I don't like being on benefits, I've always worked. They make you like the stereotypical people on benefits' (Rhianna). Against all the odds, two of the young mothers worked in London. Ashley suffered from depression and anxiety, brought on by being cut off from family and friends who were back in London. In order to counter her isolation, Ashley 'took the first job I could get' which was working part-time at a supermarket in East London. Not only did this involve Ashley having to make complex travel and child-care arrangements – including leaving her flat at 5 a.m. and travelling for over two hours – but her wages of £520 per month barely made it cost-effective once her travel and private childcare costs were taken into account.

"It's not worth it, you're no better off from sitting on your bum doing nothing. By the time I get my wages and pay for his nursery, top of my rent, top of my Council Tax, I basically live off of my Child Benefit and Child Tax Credits for the week to do food shopping and things like that. So, the day I get paid my wages, they're gone because I have to pay everything out, rent, Council Tax, phone bill and then I live off my benefits to get food and travel for the week."

Conclusion

The paper has illustrated how housing precarity and employment precarity intertwine in the lives of homeless, poor East London youth. Given that their earnings were low, unstable and unpredictable, meeting rent payments was difficult in subsidised temporary accommodation and near impossible in the PRS. In previous generations, working-class London youth relied upon gaining a council or housing association tenancy in terms of getting independent housing, even if the route into such housing could involve homelessness and living in temporary accommodation. For the current generation of multi-ethnic working-class youth, this homeless route into social housing has silted up due to austerity cuts and 'reforms'. Part of this silting up involved how the young people were on the 'wrong side' of councils' reprioritisation of social housing allocations – the undeserving poor – since they were currently not in paid work, even though they had extensive previous work experience.

Private renting proved anathema to the youth due to its precarity and expense. However, despite their own rational assessment of the unsuitability of the PRS, the East London young people were increasingly being placed in a situation where they either had to return to the often-overcrowded family home or rent privately. If the PRS is becoming

a 'tenure of destination' for low-income youth, this represents a case of 'press-ganged' Generation Rent. *Not renting* from the PRS is no longer an option. The neoliberal, austerity-shrunk welfare state is coercing the youth into a tenure that *they knew themselves* to be unsustainable given the kind of precarious NMW jobs they had had in the past and were likely to have in the future. In policy terms, the PRS requires fundamental reform in terms of improved tenants' rights if it's going to provide even a modicum of security for low-income youth, while the social housing sector needs to be massively expanded as the recent Shelter (2019) report highlights.

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