

## Condemned to precarity? Criminalised Youths, social enterprise and the sub-precariat

### **Purpose**

Discussions relating to the value of (stable) employment in reducing and preventing (re)offending. For many ex-offenders a multitude of barriers stands between them and access to the labour market. As a potential conduit for social change, social enterprises are a growing and seemingly politically popular alternative to mainstream employment.

### **Design/methodology/approach**

Focusing on the qualitative lived experiences of young people (aged between 16 and 18) with criminal convictions enrolled in one such enterprise, this paper examines the extent to which work integrated social enterprise (WISE) can assist in overcoming existing barriers to the labour market.

### **Findings**

The paper highlights the value of social enterprise(s) in addressing the complex needs and precarities of criminalised youths, promoting social inclusion and assisting with progression into future employment. The paper also discusses the limitations of social enterprise(s) in overcoming external structural barriers to meaningful employment for those with an offending history and the implications for young people who aspire to more than precariat work.

### **Originality**

Justice orientated social enterprises are allowing young people with criminal records the opportunity to build social capita and access precarious work, previously unattainable for many. By focusing on the concept of 'precarity', this paper builds upon existing research on the collateral consequences of criminal convictions offering insights into the various challenges facing criminalised youths attempting to build a positive pro-social work identity within contemporary labour markets.

- **Type of Paper:** Research Paper
- **Key words:** precariat; sub-precariat; criminalised youths; collateral consequences

# Condemned to precarity? Criminalised Youths, social enterprise, and the sub-preariat

## Introduction

Over the last four decades the nature of labour and employment has shifted profoundly. In the UK, where this study is based, the election of Thatcher's Conservative government in 1979 and the emergence of neoliberal capitalism as the dominant political-economic ideology signalled the beginning of a significant labour market restructure (Harvey, 2005). Through a process of deindustrialisation, globalisation, automation and marketization, the UK has been transformed from a manufacturing economy to a service or 'information' economy (Crutchfield, 2014; Lloyd, 2018). Such de-industrial restructuring has fundamentally altered the nature of work available and in doing so has resulted in high rates of unemployment and in-work poverty in areas previously known for manufacturing and heavy industry (Crutchfield, 2014). Job insecurity and competition in these areas has subsequently produced an expansion of the 'reserve army of labour'; an 'army' that function as a readily disposable workforce who keep wages depressed and can prevent any potential dissidence amongst the lowest paid workers by providing "a subtle reminder to those in work that everybody [is] expendable" (Hall *et al.*, 2012, p.28) [1].

Amongst many socially disadvantaged groups the ability to secure paid work is increasingly challenging, with populist views and policy developments often at odds with lived experiences (Shildrick and McDonald, 2007). This is particularly true for ex-offender groups who, in addition to possessing multiple and complex social needs, face the stigma and associated collateral consequences of criminal convictions (Bennett, 2017; Henley, 2018b; Mauer and Chesney-Lind, 2002; Travis, 2002). Although evidence suggests that (stable) employment can help reduce and prevent (re)offending, for many ex-offenders a multitude of barriers stands between them and access to the labour market (Fletcher *et al.*, 1998; Henley, 2018a). For Standing (2011) then, the criminal justice system functions as a powerful incubator for what he refers to as 'the precariat' – a new social 'class' developing out of globalisation, neoliberal policies and the increasing demand for flexible labour markets [2].

As a potential conduit for social change, social enterprises are a growing and seemingly politically popular alternative to mainstream employment (Farmer *et al.*, 2021; Vidal, 2005). Often used as a

stepping stone to other more 'stable' forms of work (Farmer *et al.*, 2021), the development of what are referred to as work-integration social enterprises (WISEs) have been particularly instrumental in affording employment opportunities and the development of social capital to some of the most disadvantaged social groups (Vidal, 2005). Developed on the premise that many within these disenfranchised groups require environments offering a level of personalisation, mentoring and accommodation of the unstable nature of their domestic lives and multiple complex needs that the traditional mainstream economy seems unable to support (Farmer *et al.*, 2021; Spear and Bidet, 2005; Vidal, 2005), there are, perhaps unsurprisingly, an increasing number of WISEs that work specifically with offender populations.

Focusing on the experience of young people with criminal convictions enrolled in one such enterprise, this paper examines the extent to which WISEs can assist in overcoming existing barriers to the labour market. Importantly, discussions within this paper are situated within the broader literature on the sociology of work and take into consideration not simply the economics of the job market, but also the contemporary nature and dynamics of work and employment. Subsequently, while we begin this paper by examining the consequences of a rise in precarious work, the paper concludes that despite the supportive role of social enterprise staff, the barriers faced by criminalised youths when looking for employment beyond WISE programmes remain so significant that even precarious work is out of reach for many. Work related social enterprises offer hope. But while opportunities for stable and meaningful employment that supports the development of a positive pro-social work identity remains limited, young offenders remain at risk of living a life consigned to the 'sub-preariat'.

## **Background**

### **Shifting Labour Markets, Young People and Precariousness**

In the contemporary world, "the chance to be exploited in a long-term job is now experienced as a privilege" (Žižek, 2012). The nature of employment and the labour market has shifted significantly. With (international) market competition pushing organisations to produce more for less, workers today face increasingly insecure, flexible and precarious forms of employment (Lloyd, 2018; Standing, 2011). Typified by low-level wages, zero-hour and/or temporary contracts and an increased demand for

productivity at the expense of individual well-being (Lloyd, 2018), the political-economic ideology of neoliberal capitalism has, according to some, devalued work from “an inalienable right [...] to a flexible, insecure commodity to be given or taken away at the whim of global markets and international competition” (Lloyd, 2012, p.620). Today, the notion of a traditional employee-employer relationship founded upon a contract whereby an individual is paid a fixed wage for a fixed number of hours irrespective of the volume of work produced, is in substantial decline (Dooley and Prause, 2004). Where once careers were, if not multigenerational, at least for life, today the precarious nature of the labour market means that for many, work functions “more like a series of encounters than an enduring relationship” (Fenton and Dermott, 2006, p.205).

Standing's (2011, 2014a) discussion of the precarious nature of work and the development of the 'precariat' developed as a direct response to these changes to neoliberal market economy. In his work Standing argues that, as the global economy has transformed, traditional class structures have been reshaped giving rise to what he refers to as the 'precariat' – a global social group 'unified' by distinctive relations of production, distribution and to the state. Crucially, however, while we may view it as 'a class-in-the-making', the precariat is not yet, in a Marxian sense, 'a class-for-itself' (Standing, 2011). Indeed, given that, whether through choice or circumstance, anyone can enter such a precarious existence, the precariat, while sharing a lack of labour-related security, is far from a homogeneous group (Standing, 2011). Drawing upon his own experience of precarious employment, Southwood (2011, p.18) suggests that it makes more sense “to talk of a spectrum of precarity”. While at one end of the spectrum he situates the kind of low-level, latent precarity that has become such a common feature of life for many workers today, at the opposite end he positions the extreme forms of precarity experienced by migrant workers and other 'denizens' (Standing, 2011, 2014a). Therefore, an analytical framework is needed that is capable of identifying and articulating the multiple dimensions of precarity as a general condition of social life (Campbell and Price, 2016).

Under contemporary capitalism, young people are at particular risk of identifying and/or being categorised as part of this precariat 'class'. As Standing cautions, while “[young people] have always entered the labour force in precarious positions, expecting to have to prove themselves and learn [...] today's youth are not offered a reasonable bargain” (2011, p.65). Unlike those in traditional working-class communities, the young precariat is far less likely to have a secure occupational identity or

narrative they can assign to their lives (Standing, 2014b). Insecure and fragmented employment opportunities, commodified education, increased competition for work and an expectation of qualifications way beyond what is typically required for the labour that is to be performed are, for many, par for the course (Hall *et al.*, 2012; Standing, 2011). Problematically, in addition to limiting legitimate opportunities for civic engagement, these kinds of barriers help breed resentment and a sense of disconnect amongst many young people today. While the world of work was once something that contributed to an individuals' identity, sense of significance and belonging, today work, or rather *precarious* work, is yet another thing "which undermines, rather than builds up, a young person's sense of mattering" (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, in press, p.17).

### **The Criminalised (Young) Precariat**

As a population subjected to wide ranging prohibitions and restrictions on meaningful civil engagement (see Henley, 2018b), those convicted of criminal offences are justifiably positioned among Standing's (2014a) denizens. Alongside increasingly precarious employment, globalisation has resulted in a sharp rise in rates of criminalisation and incarceration (Standing, 2011). In England and Wales, for example, the prison population has approximately doubled since the early 1990s (Sturge, 2019). Indeed, according to the charity Unlock there are now over 11 million people in the UK living with a criminal record [3]. Much has been written about the wider consequences of criminalisation. Whether invisible 'civil' punishments (Travis, 2002) such as restrictions on rights (for example, to welfare), or the wider "foreseeable collateral harms of punishment" (Bennett, 2017, p.484) such as stigmatisation and labelling, punishments are often "accentuated by barriers to their normal involvement in society" (Standing, 2011, p.88).

Of course, many of the labour market barriers facing the criminalised precariat are similar to those of other disadvantaged social groups. These may include, but are not limited to, poor educational attainment, low self-esteem and complex health and behavioural problems (Fletcher *et al.*, 1998). Yet, for the criminalised precariat, these issues are compounded by the stigma of a criminal record which remains one of the most obstinate barriers to ex-offenders seeking employment (Henley, 2018a). Research suggests this is also true of criminal records obtained during childhood (Healey *et al.*, 2004; Nagin and Waldfoegel, 1995). Despite a range of alternative 'diversionary' disposals available in the UK

for dealing with young ‘offenders’ (Carr, 2019) and most convictions being ‘spent’ after a set period (Stacey, 2018), the stigma of childhood criminal records are known to adversely affect young peoples’ education and employment opportunities (Carr, 2019; House of Commons Justice Committee, 2017). The relationship between (un)employment and offending is, therefore, an enduring topic of criminological inquiry particularly within criminological attempts to explain and analyse the process of desistance.

While it goes beyond the constraints of this paper to provide an in-depth look at this expansive body of literature (see instead Weaver, 2019), broadly speaking, criminological explanations of desistance can be categorised into those which focus on ‘life-course’ and those which focus on ‘selection’ or individual pre-dispositions [4]. Whereas criminological life-course theories (see for example, Hirschi, 1969; Hirschi and Stark, 1969; Sampson and Laub, 1993) emphasise the effects of maturation, key life events and the adoption of social roles on gradual decreases in offending behaviour over time; for others, desistance from crime is a more agentic process (Maruna, 2001; Le Bel *et al.*, 2008; Skardhamar and Savolainen, 2014; Rocque, 2015). More recently, theories have begun to adopt a more integrative perspective looking at desistance as a combination of both individual *and* structural factors (Giordano *et al.*, 2002; Barry, 2013; Copp *et al.*, 2019). For these theories the process of desistance is linked not only to the development of conventional social bonds, legitimate opportunities and individual motivation, but also to “changing perceptions of self” within a broader social context (Barry, 2013, p.160) – a process Billingham and Irwin-Rogers (in press) refer to as ‘mattering’. However, criminal justice interventions with an education and/or employment focus are usually short term, are often seen as part of a ‘punishment’ due to their relationship to youth justice and have an overarching aim of reducing reoffending (Carr, 2019; House of Commons Justice Committee, 2017). These interventions rarely lead to long term sustainable employment (Henley, 2018a). As will be shown, it is within this context that we have seen the development of justice oriented WISEs. We argue that although WISEs can cultivate this sense of ‘mattering’ in positive pro-social directions, their advances are jeopardised by the structure of the existing labour market and the nature of contemporary work.

### **Work Integrated Social Enterprise (WISE).**

First emerging in public policy discourse in the 1990s (O'Shaughnessy and O'Hara 2016), social enterprise can now be found in almost all areas of economic activity. Developed in the sector of the economy "between the market and the state" (OECD, 1999: p9) social enterprise sits far from a traditional capitalist model of for-profit generation (Shaw and Carter, 2007; Santos, 2012). Broadly defined by their desire to innovate and bring about change for the benefit of society (Waddock and Steckler, 2016), and while often compared to co-operatives in terms of their aims, ethos, and value structure, social enterprises are best conceptualised as operating as a "bridge between co-operatives and non-profit organizations" (Defourny and Nyssens, 2006:7). While there is little consensus as to the definition of social enterprise (Teasdale, 2011), and despite widespread variation in terms of their size, structure and approach (O'Hara 2001), social enterprises aim to develop sustainable inclusive strategies to respond to social problems (K'neife and Houghton 2013). Given their potential as a job creation mechanism for groups largely excluded from the labour market (O'Shaughnessy and O'Hara 2016), the development of work integrated social enterprise (WISE) has emerged as a dominant sub-area in the field of social enterprise.

So-called WISEs are broadly aimed at addressing the growing issues of precarity, and exclusion discussed above (Spear and Bidet, 2005), by supporting disadvantaged communities to access employment (Roy *et al.*, 2014). Perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly given their marginalised status within the UK and further afield, there are an increasing number of WISEs working with offender groups, where through employment, social interactions and life skills are also supporting improved wellbeing (Macaulay *et al.*, 2018). As Lysaght *et al.* (2018) caution however, there is considerable variation across WISEs as to the nature and type of support available as well as to the ultimate endpoint goal. Subsequently, while attempts have been made to categorise these organisations, there remains "a great variety of organisational typologies" (Lysaght *et al.* 2018: p.66). Davister *et al.* (2004), for example, identify four typologies of WISE: i) transitional occupation, ii) creation of permanent self-financed jobs, iii) professional integration with permanent subsidies, and iv) socialisation through productive activity. In contrast, Vidal's (2005) model consisted of two broad categories: i) intermediate or transitional companies, and ii) those who act as end employers. In other words, those "providing *pathways* to mainstream employment" and those "providing *alternatives* to mainstream employment" (Roy *et al.*, 2021: p3). Problematically, what neither Vidal or Davister's model accounts for, is the changing

economic environment, the rise in people in precarious employment, and the availability of stable, *meaningful* employment opportunities.

Crucially, while each typology is dependent upon external factors (not least funding streams) as well as the ability of the individual to overcome the factors which led to their exclusion from the labour market, each result in a very specific positioning of the WISE to the labour market, as well as unique markers for 'success'. This is certainly true of the increasing number of WISEs working with marginalised offender groups. As the findings below indicate, success with offender groups can be understood in a variety of ways that are unique to this particular population over and above simply facilitating access to permanent stable employment. Macaulay *et al.*, (2018) note, for example, that where a social enterprise provides or facilitates employment, they also improve health and wellbeing through the development of pro-social networks and a sense of belonging. As discussed, for many criminalised youths living under current labour market conditions, the barriers to employment can appear insurmountable. Without institutional support, criminalised youths' risk being resigned to life as what we refer to as the 'sub-preariat'; that is, a subset within the systemic experience of precarity who face permanent exclusion from even the most precarious forms of employment.

Whilst opportunities exist within Youth Justice for criminalised youths to engage with education and employment programmes, they are often part of a sentence, time limited, and can have negative stereotypes such as community supervision schemes. Most significantly, however, is that they are entrenched within the Criminal Justice System. For many, then, work of this kind is associated with punishment (Haines and O'Mahony, 2006; Stephenson *et al.*, 2013) rather than 'ownership and responsibility' (Nicholson, 2010) or a 'hook for change' (Giordano *et al.*, 2002). Furthermore, for those who are no longer under Youth Justice supervision, what opportunities are available often fail to meet the multiple and complex needs of the individual and the challenges that lie ahead in the contemporary labour market.

Drawing upon interviews conducted with social enterprise staff and young people with criminal convictions enrolled within a social enterprise programme, this paper aims to answer the question: to what extent can social enterprise overcome some of the barriers to employment for young people with an offending history?

## Methodology

This article draws upon qualitative data collected as part of a three-year funded project working with 'SWORs' - a not for profit social enterprise supported by an Advisory Board of representatives from public, private and voluntary sectors. Established in the UK in 2013, SWORs aims to provide young people (aged between 16-18) who have been involved with their local youth offending team (YOT) with a six-month paid employment scheme. All work is undertaken outdoors and includes fencing, allotment clearance, paving, grass cutting, flood mitigation and litter picking. While the young people involved with SWORs are employees from the outset, crucially they are engaged on a voluntary basis rather than court mandated to attend and are provided with more holistic support where needed. Employees typically work with a single supervisor in small groups (between 2-5 young employees). Some SWORs sites also offer qualification opportunities alongside work. SWORs employees are paid minimum wage. As a WISE that aims to support employees with external work opportunities with partner organisations at the end of the six months, SWORs fits broadly into the category of an intermediate or transitional enterprise (Vidal, 2005).

SWORs receives its funding from a mixture of sources: government grants, public donations, from its partner organisations and in selling the services of the social enterprise. SWORs is managed by a range of individuals from both business and social work backgrounds; however, many have a history of working within youth justice. All supervisors generally have extensive experience working with vulnerable young people and/or within the youth justice sector. One of the supervisors interviewed in this study had been involved in criminal activities themselves as a youth, motivating them to work with this social enterprise. However, there are currently no opportunities for the youths employed by SWORs to work at the social enterprise on a permanent basis.

Data collection, which took place between 2017 and 2019, involved semi-structured interviews with supervisors (n=4) and all employees (n=23) from across three SWORs sites that were surveyed. Of the employees, twenty-two (n=22) were male and one (n=1) female [5]. The vast majority (n=20) were white. 22% (n=5) of employees interviewed were or had been 'looked after' children, compared to only 0.67% of under-18s in England (Department for Education, 2021a). 73% (n=17) had been excluded from school, as compared to only 0.1% of all children enrolled in schools in England (Department for Education, 2021b). Where known, 92% (n=12) of employees interviewed lived with other offenders.

Furthermore, the majority of young people had committed multiple offences prior to engaging in SWORs (median = 12). Of these offences, the most common were criminal damage, burglary, common assault and shoplifting which the Youth Justice Board grades as 'mid-serious'.

Employee interviews covered past experiences (if any) of employment/training, their experiences of working at SWORs and their future aspirations for employment. Interviews with supervisors covered experiences working with young people at SWORs, how SWORs influenced the employment prospects of this group and their perspective on the wider employment opportunities for criminalised youths. Additionally, 200+ hours of participant observations were conducted, and detailed field notes were written at the end of each day. Spending time immersed in the working environments of young people expanded the researcher's understanding of how they engaged with employment at SWORs, enabled trust and rapport to be built, and in doing so, helped to challenge some of the power imbalances between researcher and the researched (Davidson, 2017; Maguire, 1987). Interview transcripts and field notes were coded and thematically analysed using Thomas's (2006) 'general inductive approach' in which, through multiple readings of the raw data, lower-level empirical themes (e.g. 'support for complex needs' and 'addressing stigma') were drawn from upper-level a priori codes (e.g. 'benefits of SWORs for employees').

Approval for this project was gained from the University's Ethics Committee. To gain the informed consent of young people, many of whom had complex needs and had long been disengaged from school, information sheets were created in a 'user-friendly' format (Wiles, 2013) with particular attention paid to the type of language used. Whilst the 'SWORs' enterprise gave permission for the researcher to contact the young people and invite them to take part in the research, full written consent came directly from the participants. Locations have been removed and pseudonyms used where direct quotes are given. Where interviews were conducted with participants under the age of 18, written consent was also obtained from a parent/guardian.

## **Findings**

The findings in this paper emphasise the value of WISEs in addressing the complex needs and precarities of criminalised youths, in promoting social inclusion and the development of pro-social

identities and in assisting with progression into future employment. The limitations of WISEs in overcoming external structural barriers to meaningful employment for those with an offending history also becomes apparent.

### **Addressing complex needs**

As noted, young people involved in persistent criminal offending typically lead chaotic lives and have multiple, complex issues. Research suggests that adverse childhood experiences can act as probabilistic predictors for further difficulties throughout the life course including involvement in offending (Farrington and West, 1990). Amongst the SWORs employees, many of the young people experienced multiple forms of precarity and marginalisation that made even precarious work unobtainable. Experiences of employment pre-SWORs exemplified the ‘chronic churning’ that Russell *et al.*, (2011) describe as characterising the experiences of those who leave school early - for example, short-term engagement in education/employment interspersed with periods of being not in employment, education or training (NEET). For some of the SWORs employees, their precarious lifestyles and offending behaviours had meant they found it difficult to commit even to this short-term education/employment and some were asked to leave because of disciplinary issues. Yet at SWORs, there was a deeper understanding and appreciation of the wider, more complex issues facing young employees:

“We know what sort of home things go on for these lads. It might be that, over a 6-week period, they might miss a day, a week, because of whatever reason [...] another company’s not going to entertain that, it’s just warning, written warning, final warning, out” – Ross (SWORs supervisor)

In addition to providing the stability that the young people desired in their lives, SWORs could accommodate for the realities of their routinely chaotic lives. Instead of simply ‘dropping’ these young people when their wider precarity inhibited full engagement in employment, SWORs was able to equip its employees with longer term work experience and provide holistic wraparound support not experienced in more traditional employment.

By working with other agencies at the YOT and helping young people find and attend relevant support programmes, supervisors at SWORs tried to help employees address complex and problematic issues including offending behaviours, drug/alcohol misuse, young parenthood and negative peer pressure and to develop more positive attitudes towards work and authority. As Ross (SWORs supervisor) was keen to explain, “You can see the confidence grow with them”. This was reflected in one employee, who explained:

“SWORs has definitely helped me cos like... [previously] if I don't know someone I wouldn't even try and make conversation with them [...] [but] because like they [SWORs] took weh to different sites where like you have to speak to different people of different trades, its built my confidence to be able to just go up to someone and start a conversation” – Scott (SWORs employee)

Indeed, due to their severe social exclusion, prior to SWORs many of these young people lacked the social skills required for the workplace. SWORs supervisors were particularly keen to try and address this:

“It's simple things like dropping litter, picking it up and putting it in the bin... Spitting – trying to stop that... It's simple things in life that I don't think they've been taught. Aye, being polite to the public in all” – Greg (SWORs supervisor)

By not only helping young people to address some of the broader issues which made their lives unstable, but by instilling within them some of the vital pro-social skills necessary to maintain engagement with employment, SWORs significantly increased the viability of their engagement in secure future employment.

During interviews SWORs employees regularly distinguished employment with a social enterprise from other ‘traditional’ employment. This was often related to the positive bond formed between employee and supervisor and the wider support that this provided. The good relationship young people had with their ‘boss’ made them more motivated to work hard and helped them to learn new skills. While one SWORs employee praised his supervisor for “join[ing] in with our crack like” (Max, SWORs employee), another explained:

“They’re just not hard on yeh. They don’t really treat you as a worker, they treat you like a friend so if I was like stuck or something, they wouldn’t come up to weh and be like a dickhead boss, they’d be like, look this is what you need to do son” – Glenn (SWORs employee)

This trust appeared to motivate the young people to avoid further criminal activities. Resonating with Sampson and Laub’s (1993) theory of informal social control, SWORs employees frequently described the importance also of the friendships and camaraderie built with their co-workers from the group in motivating them to attend work every day and avoid crime. ‘Banter’ was frequently described as one of the best aspects of working at SWORs. Whereas much employment within the contemporary labour market might act as a cultural shock for the young, criminalised precariat, akin to more traditional working class industrial employment, SWORs appeared to provide a more familiar cultural atmosphere to help bridge the gap between worklessness and employment.

### **Addressing social inclusion**

Like other WISE programmes that work with offender populations, SWORs made significant efforts to reduce the stigma of a criminal record and to reintegrate young people into their communities. In line with the broader ‘child first, offender second’ approach (YJB, 2019) it aimed to ‘rebrand’ young people as valued workers in the community rather than ex-offenders. The SWORs logo was clearly displayed on all clothing and PPE equipment as well as on the company van that picked up the young people. Not only did this help foster a sense of community between supervisors and employees, but crucially, this demonstrated to potential onlookers that these young people, far from being ‘ex-offenders’ carrying out community service, were employees of a legitimate company. Furthermore, much of the work at SWORs visibly benefitted local communities. For example, one of the common tasks was waterway clearance, helping to improve the aesthetic appeal of the area and avert flooding by preventing blockages. The community frequently responded positively to the SWORs employees’ work. Often passers-by complimented young people, with many thanking them for doing work that had long been needed. Thus, participation in such work resulted in a degree of civic reintegration for these criminalised youths. Additionally the work undertaken by SWORs appeared to help challenge public perceptions of criminalised youths and promote their social inclusion which was recognised by SWORs employees:

“It’s nice that these people don’t know your past and they don’t know what you’ve done, they just know who you are now. They just see us fixing up the neighbourhood, helping people out” – Scott (SWORs employee)

While employment forms part of the criteria for ‘respectability’ in society (Giordano *et al.*, 2002:), for employees of SWORs it was the public service nature of the work and the positive image it provided that gave them this. Indeed, sometimes SWORs employees helped to repair the harms of the wider offending population; cleaning graffiti, removing fly-tipped items and restoring the damage done by vandals. This was seen as particularly symbolic, benefiting the public, while demonstrating that these young people were reformed. SWORs ability to reduce the stigma of past criminality among young people while promoting social integration was highly significant.

### **Addressing progression into future employment**

Employment with SWORs reduced young people’s distance from the labour market by providing them with valuable work experience that they might otherwise have found difficult to obtain. Although the intention was often to help employees gain vital ‘qualifications’ (for example, the CSCS card, and basic first aid training), this was not always possible. Nonetheless, as Paul (SWORs supervisor) reasoned, the varied work undertaken at SWORs helped young people add to their CV by developing new skills and experience which could be “transfer[red] into other employment opportunities”. The SWORs supervisor could also function as a potential referee for young people who, because of the nature of their employment and educational history, might not otherwise have a suitable reference. SWORs supervisors, YOT workers, could also provide young people support with job applications and/or interviews for employment opportunities beyond SWORs.

Testament to these efforts, most young people leaving SWORs moved into further employment, training, or education. However, this employment was primarily precarious work. Several young people moved on as casual construction workers, while others found employment in call-centres, hospitality, warehouses, factories or as cleaners. As is typical of such precarious work, most of these jobs were insecure, low-paid, low-skilled, under-valued work and held little opportunity for progression. The training programmes and educational courses were little better. Very few of these presented opportunities to attain recognisable qualifications that would be required to secure skilled employment,

rather these were intended as a 'step' *towards* further education. This resonates with the observation made by Shildrick and MacDonald (2007) that under-qualified, working-class school leavers are usually encouraged onto lower-level vocational qualifications which prove to be worthless in terms of labour market fortunes.

Yet the young people in this study aspired to more than precariat work. Participants felt the impact of intergenerational precarity, observing those around them (family members, friends, neighbours) struggling with the wider impact of a precariat lifestyle. SWORs employees appeared to recognise the importance of stable employment in preventing them becoming tempted by, or resorting to crimes for economic gain. Participants spoke about the desire for a stable full-time job, "something that's reliable" (Max, SWORs employee) and the structure and financial stability that stable employment and a regular income would provide. As one young person explained:

"I would want to be stable at a young age – and have a nice bit of money in the bank, house, car. Cos a lot of people don't, you know what I mean, I see people at thirty and they've got no life do you know what I mean, I want to be secure" – William (SWORs employee)

Yet most appeared acutely aware and somewhat disillusioned by the precarious work that awaited them:

"I couldn't deal with having like a zero-hours contract and getting up in the morning not knowing that I have a job to go to" – Max (SWORs employee)

More than this, young people aspired to work that was *meaningful* to them, desiring employment that aligned with their own interests and values. Indeed, while Julie (SWORs employee) spoke about her desire to work "in the family court with like children and that" because of her love of "helping people", Scott (SWORs employee) talked about his desire to find a mechanics apprenticeship:

"It's summat I've always loved so I just think, you might as well do something you love, so then, it's not a job, it's a hobby, you don't wake up on a morning thinking aww I've gotta go to work, you wake up and just think I'm off to work to do what I love" – Scott (SWORs employee)

Problematically, young people faced several barriers to obtaining stable, meaningful employment. In particular, as highlighted above, most participants had been excluded from mainstream schools. Despite progressing to Pupil Referral Units and other alternative education providers, many continued to struggle with truancy and problematic behaviours. Consequently, very few young people working with SWORs had any qualifications, and supervisors explained that some could not even read or write. As one supervisor explained:

“I’ve asked young people, if I had a magic wand, what job would they want to do? And they say something and I say to get that, you’d have to go back to school, do your English and your Maths. And then you might have to go to University. It’s all these obstacles in front of what they want.” – Greg (SWORs supervisor)

Another young person described wanting to be an electrician in the future. However, because of his lack of a maths qualification he had been encouraged into doing a painting and decorating course by his vocational training college. This left him feeling uninspired, unmotivated and frustrated. Furthermore, as noted above, many of those situated within the precariat are today required to have qualifications beyond what is traditionally expected of the type of work they perform. As one supervisor explained, this acted as a significant barrier for SWORs employees looking to move on:

“The problem with our young people is always going to be the education background... a job came up within the council which was for landscaping and what have you, and we were going to put some of our young people forward for it. But they wanted like 5 GCSEs at C+ grade. And for the work, why do they need grades for that sort of quality?” - Fred (SWORs supervisor)

The young people in this study, therefore, are limited not only by their history of educational disengagement, but also by a labour market where, in order to ameliorate their selection process, employers are increasingly demanding qualifications beyond what is necessary for the job role. While SWORs could sometimes assist young people in gaining entry-level qualifications (such as the CSCS card), in the six-months young people attended this social enterprise, it could not provide the level of education seemingly necessary for them to progress beyond precariat work.

The legacy of a criminal record was another barrier faced by participants. Although under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974, most young people's convictions will become 'spent', the need to disclose their criminal history still limited the jobs they could apply for. Several participants aspired to occupations that they now felt their criminal record made impossible:

"I'm very limited as to what I can do, cos I've got like assault [on my record]. [...] [C]all centres and that can take us on [...] but in terms of working in like elderly homes and stuff I can't, cos obviously they do CBRs and stuff so... so I'm very limited as to what I can do" – Max (SWORs employee)

Despite many of their offences being minor, non-violent and committed under the age of 18, having a criminal record served to further consign this group to precariat occupations. Indeed, as outlined above, although being involved in a social enterprise such as SWORs could reduce the stigma young people experienced in their communities, it could do little to mitigate the negative effects of the long-lasting label of a criminal record.

Supervisors spoke about the challenges of a particularly competitive job market facing the young people outside of the supportive environment of SWORs. To progress beyond precariat work, most SWORs employees would need to gain an apprenticeship. Even if they were willing to accept having to work for considerably less pay than at SWORs, participants would likely have to compete with 'thousands' of other applicants, most of whom have qualifications and no criminal record. The wider difficulties experienced in the lives of SWORs employees meant that many were poorly equipped to deal with the sheer number of knockbacks and setbacks that are routine features of the current labour market:

"It's giving them the motivation and the confidence for them to move on... Traineeships will only give £30. They won't get out of bed for that... Its trying to get them motivated – you've got to do it for nothing to prove yourself... But its giving them motivation and the confidence of doing it" - Greg (SWORs supervisor)

In some instances, supervisors encouraged young people to ask family and friends' to help them in finding work. Unfortunately for most of the young people employed by SWORs, intergenerational

precarity meant that their surrounding networks were also likely also unemployed or precariat workers themselves.

Several supervisors across different SWORs sites were critical of partner organisations who were hesitant to employ and train criminalised youths even after their successful completion of the scheme. As one supervisor, Ross, explained, while many companies were keen to be involved in the work of SWORs to “tick the box that they are helping a social enterprise”, few were willing to actually offer SWORs employees with a job at the end of it. This strong viewpoint was shared by Greg (SWORs supervisor):

“It’s the exit strategy for the young people. It’s just nothing there. [...] they [employers] promise the earth when they get linked with [SWORs] ‘cos they have to be linked to a social enterprise, to tick their boxes for whatever, it looks good for them. Whereas there’s just nothing and its irritating” – Greg (SWORs supervisor)

Supervisors expressed strong feelings of disappointment for the young people who had made huge progress during their six months at SWORs and were, for all intents and purposes, ‘ready for work’ but were hindered by a lack of ongoing meaningful employment opportunities. Many voiced concerns about the impact of ‘dropping’ these young people at such a critical stage, and their belief that some young people might not have returned to offending post-SWORs had there been more follow-on employment opportunities for them.

## **Discussion**

The value of social enterprise programmes such as SWORs cannot be understated. The holistic wraparound support and mentoring helps address a wide range of social issues while providing basic employment and social skills. SWORs improved the employment prospects of young people, reduced their distance from the labour market and left them in a much stronger position to maintain engagement with employment following their participation in the scheme. Indeed, by the end of the programme most young people were sufficiently stable and had developed a routine that allowed them to attend work daily. Employment at a WISE also helped to address some of the practical barriers those with criminal

records face in obtaining employment – providing them with, for example, vital work experience, qualifications and references.

Like Nagin and Waldfogel (1995), who found that convictions limit opportunities in stable skilled occupations and increase job instability, our findings showed that the work of SWORs remained insufficient to move this group beyond a precariat existence. Whilst most young people progressed into further employment upon leaving the scheme, this work remained insecure, low-paid, low-skilled and mundane. SWORs enabled young people to move from life as part of a ‘sub-precariat’ who are unable to access even the most precarious work, to that of the precariat. However, it could not support a move to more permanent, ‘meaningful’ employment that was desired by so many SWORs employees. As Crutchfield (2014, p.96) asserts, “desire for a ‘real job’ or the rejection of a ‘slave job’ is not an unwillingness to work” but rather, “a desire to have work that has real value”. Young people working with SWORs wished to obtain employment that they found inherently purposeful and that aligned with their own self-concept.

Krupa *et al.*, (2016) suggest that while WISEs provide valuable work experience, they cannot guarantee a level playing field with those job seekers with experience from more mainstream avenues. In other words, in support of existing literature in this area (Le Bel *et al.*, 2008; Bennett, 2017; Weaver, 2018), the stigma of a criminal record remained a significant barrier for SWORs employees in obtaining stable employment. While our data showed that participation in a WISE can help reduce stigma within the wider community (see also Svanberg *et al.*, 2010; Roy *et al.*, 2017; Krupa *et al.*, 2019), this did not always translate into employment opportunities. For many of the partner organisations of SWORs, who would have been invaluable in supplying follow-on employment opportunities for the young people, there was great reluctance at taking the ‘risk’ in employing these ‘ex-offenders’ - a disinclination which has been extensively reported elsewhere (Gill, 1997; Williams, 2007; Haslewood-Pócsik, *et al.*, 2008; Obatusin and Ritter-Williams, 2019). Not only did this further serve to consign young people to precariat, insecure employment opportunities, but it demonstrates a need for both ‘intermediate’ or ‘transitional’ companies and ‘as end’ (Vidal, 2005) WISE employers when working with criminalised youths.

Organisational psychologists have found that meaningful work is important for human flourishing, psychological well-being and employee engagement and productivity (Frankl, 1992; Ryff and Singer,

1998; Allan *et al.*, 2017). Our data showed that young people particularly valued the social bonds they built with fellow young employees and supervisors. Several research studies demonstrate that individuals who have rewarding interpersonal interactions, and who subsequently identify with their co-workers, perceive their employment to be more meaningful (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Bechky, 2003; May *et al.*, 2004; Grant *et al.*, 2008). Many SWORs employees stated this desire to maintain these meaningful bonds was a principle reason for avoiding (re)offending. Unfortunately, the types of precarious employment available to these young people outside the sphere of social enterprise are unlikely to provide them with such rewarding interpersonal interactions with co-workers. This is further evidenced in Winlow and Hall's (2009) study with precariat workers in Northern England who highlight the socially isolating nature of unsociable shift patterns and high levels of employee turnover so common in precariat employment.

The potentially negative effects of consigning criminalised youths to precarious employment and/or long periods of unemployment must be acknowledged. Research into desistance demonstrates the importance of offenders creating a non-offending or 'pro-social' identity (Maruna, 2001; Farrall and Calverley, 2006; Vaughan, 2007; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Copp *et al.*, 2019). The ability to create this new identity is dependent upon the availability of a 'hook for change' (Giordano *et al.*, 2002). SWORs offered criminalised youths such a 'hook'. As well as obtaining work experience, they could connect with peers and re-engage with the wider community. Indeed, social enterprise programmes and cooperatives "offer a valuable infrastructure to support individuals in forging a legitimate identity" (Cosgrove and O'Neill, 2011: pp.26-27). Furthermore, as Billingworth and Irwin-Rogers point out, we all have a "deep seated need to matter to other people, and to matter in the physical world - to be a consequential causal force in both a social and material sense" (in press, p.5). For the previously marginalised young people of this study, SWORs provided them with a sense of meaning. Yet, without a long-term sustainable social enterprise model, which spans transitional and end employment (Vidal 2005), or a progressive model of support which extends into the public and private sector, maintaining this legitimate identity or sense of 'mattering' is challenging.

It is clear from our data that young people with a history of criminal behaviours both desire and need more than precariat work opportunities. It is also evident that WISEs can make positive changes in the lives of these criminalised youths, providing stable work upon which to build a pro-social identity and

challenging the stigma associated with prior involvement in crime. Yet, despite this good work, due to the conditions of contemporary labour markets, an infrastructure to monitor and support this is sadly lacking outside the social enterprise environment. The labour market is developing in a way in which it is increasingly unable, or perhaps unwilling, to provide meaningful employment for criminalised youths. Precariat work prevents the formation of an occupational identity, acts as an unsuitable 'hook for change' (Patulny, *et al.*, 2020) and signals to employees that they are insignificant and disposable, rather than bolstering their sense of 'mattering' (Billingham and Irwin-Rogers, *in press*). Although the evidence presented in this paper demonstrate the value of WISEs in cultivating this sense of 'mattering', ultimately, their advances are jeopardised by the structure of the existing labour market, the nature of contemporary work and the ongoing stigma of criminalisation.

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[1] It is important to observe here that the current labour shortages in the UK generated by, amongst other factors, the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit (Jones *et al.*, 2021 Partington, 2021), have had a huge impact on this 'reserve army'. These changes have likely further added to the many labour market challenges faced by young offenders seeking employment opportunities. While this study took place before the COVID-19 pandemic, analysis by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 2020 examines the detrimental impact of temporary lockdowns, workplace closures, rising precarity and broader labour market disruptions caused by the closure of global borders. More can be read about this at the following link: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/—dgreports/—dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms\\_755910.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/—dgreports/—dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_755910.pdf) 2. The authors suggest this is an area in need of further exploration.

[2] In his work, Standing (2011) discusses the rise of a criminalised precariat both *within* and *outside* the prison walls. While acknowledging the existence of what he refers to as a 'precariat behind bars' through the use and rise of cheap forms of prison labour, our focus here is primarily upon the impact of a precariat existence outside the prison walls.

[3] This statistic can be found at the following link: <https://www.unlock.org.uk/policy-issues/key-facts/>.

[4] It is important to note here that the term 'desistance' is itself widely contested both in terms of its meaning and it can be empirically measured, and readers should see Weaver (2019) for more on this.

[5] During the two years in which the data collection took place, and the three years prior to this, the researcher was only aware of one female engaged on the SWORs programme. This appears somewhat reflective of broader gendered trends in youth justice in which boys comprise over 80% of first-time entrants (Youth Justice Board/Ministry of Justice, 2021).

