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# Will Ireland's youth once again pay for their elders' crisis?

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Irish youth, who already suffered a lethal cocktail of unemployment, emigration, high rents, mortgage arrears, welfare cuts and homelessness as the legacy of the 2008 recession, seem likely to again suffer significantly from the long-term implications of the Covid-19 crisis. While the previous recession can, at least to some degree, be blamed on an older generation's lack of political and economic leadership, clearly this crisis cannot. Nonetheless, there is a clear generational dynamic with young generations making economic and social sacrifices to protect the health and lives of older generations. Most do so willingly, but Ireland has a reciprocal obligation to ensure the young do not again pay a disproportional cost for this second crisis in a decade of their young lives. The political and policy choices we make now, and related realignments, will create path-dependent structural change that will determine class, gender, ethnic and generational distributional impacts for decades to come. Young people are already at the centre of the political debate about the future of Covid-19-related social welfare responses (Leahy et al., 2020). We can expect increased stereotyping, scapegoating and stigmatisation of young people in that regard (Finn, 2019; Tyler and Slater, 2018).

The 2008 recession, which led to high youth unemployment and emigration, translated into high incidences of mental ill health, youth suicide and self-harm. Scarred and with personal milestones stunted by the absence of decent employment and secure housing tenure, the demand for change in the 2020 General Election

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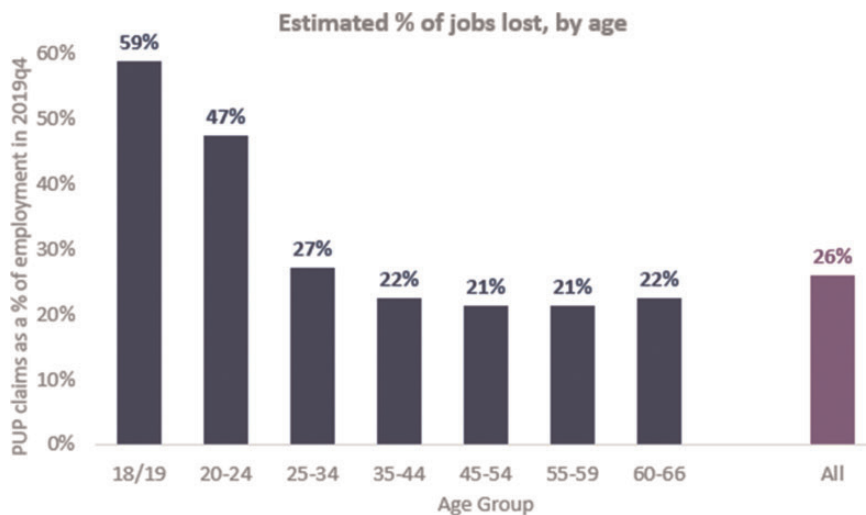
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manifested underlying intergenerational political conflict. Most young people who left Ireland over the last decade did so not for lifestyle choice but to find better and less precarious jobs (Glynn et al., 2014). They left in a decade when welfare and labour market policy was manifestly unfair in terms of intergenerational justice. We saw corrosive intergenerational distributional outcomes in housing policy leading to the phenomena of ‘generation rent’ and ‘generation stay at home’, lower wages and pensions for young public sector entrants, an expansion of sanctions and poor quality labour market programmes including the discontinued JobBridge.<sup>1</sup> There were controversial age-related reductions in social welfare payments for young people and derogatory political discourse targeted at young people to justify these cuts, while younger people became vulnerable to homelessness. Of course not all young people suffered, and scarring was not equally distributed (Wilson et al., 2020). Recent research highlights the complex needs associated with low income, ill health, disability, migration, ethnicity and educational disadvantage, where people also experience more labour market insecurity (Dowling, 2020). We need to ensure services do not reinforce the negative psychological impact of unemployment and trauma (Whelan, 2020).

Emerging from the previous crisis, Irish politicians showed limited imagination or ambition with regard to policy responses to youth precariousness. It is timely to ask now whether and how any new government will rise above intergenerational power differentials and turn the compass towards hope for the disproportionate number of young people who will suffer economically as a direct outcome of the Covid-19 crisis.

Figure 1 highlights how, like in the previous recession, a disproportionate share of Covid-19 unemployment is falling on young people. Those under 34 comprise



**Figure 1.** Workers in impacted sectors are younger. Source: Economic and Social Research Institute (2020).

less than one-third of the workforce but 43% of the pandemic unemployment payment (PUP). Table 1 shows workers in the most severely impacted sectors are most likely to be young, precarious and unskilled, with the share of employees with less than tertiary education highest in the most severely impacted sectors.

The pre-Covid-19 indigenous Irish labour market was structurally characterised by a stubborn cohort of low productivity firms employing poorly paid low-skilled workers, creating a 'low learning trap' (Murphy, 2016; O'Riain, 2017). Low pay is epidemic for young people, 50% of those aged 15–24 in employment took home less than €292pw in 2018, while half of 25–29 year olds took home less than €465 (Nugent, 2020). Table 1 illustrates how precarious workers in the most severely impacted sectors are both in debt and more likely to be renting. In the short term they are dependent on rent supplement, well known for employment and poverty traps (Beirne et al., 2020).

Ireland's immediate post-Covid-19 response was progressive in its impact on low-income families (Beirne et al., 2020). How can we ensure generational progressivity with sufficient and appropriate investment in the future of our youth? A two-tier PUP is justified with arguments that realignment to less generous established welfare payments is particularly justified for young people for whom issues of employment incentives have been identified (Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP), 2020). However, there are also issues of income adequacy, a 'normalisation' strategy could also level up the present under 25s jobseekers payment of €112.70pw and examine the operation of parental income means testing for under 25s who have been forced back to living in the family home. Lone parents who depend on income supports (98% of them women)

**Table 1.** Severely impacted sectors are more likely young, precarious and unskilled.

Indicator	Severe	Medium	Mild	All
Share in receipt of PUP (%)	41.2	13.7	7.2	21.1
Share of total employment sectors A-R (%)	32.7	42.9	24.4	100.0
Share under 35 (%)	41.8	26.9	28.4	32.2
Share with less than tertiary education (%)	59.2	32.2	34.6	32.2
Share non-Irish (%)	20.4	13.7	16.5	16.3
Share female (%)	41.0	45.0	59.0	45.3
Share male	59.0	55.0	41.0	54.7
Share in role less than 12 months (%)	22.4	13.8	15.4	17.0
Share self-employed (%)	15.0	10.3	19.7	14.1
Share in part-time employment (%)	29.2	12.5	20.2	20.4
HH income median (Euro)	54,000	80,700	52,700	
Share with NLA (%)	68.6	67.1	73.2	
Share with debt (%)	61.0	73.0	57.8	
Total debt service burden (%)	13.8	14.9	16.6	
Renter share (%)	44.4	24.0	39.5	

Source: Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (2020).

are particularly vulnerable to poverty and deprivation. Policy must accommodate care-work and support legitimate decisions to work part-time (Society of St Vincent de Paul, 2019).

A new social contract needs to include a ‘social wage’ (universal basic services) and ‘a living wage’ or ‘participation income’ (from employment and/or social welfare) as part of a High Road Back to Work Strategy (Coote and Percy, 2020; Murphy et al., 2020). Enterprise policy needs to advance the productivity of indigenous firms, and combine with education and training, apprenticeship and traineeships, and life-long learning for low-skilled workers in and out of employment. New forms of employment protection legislation need to safeguard against negative, perilous forms of atypical work. A public employment eco system made up of public, private and not-for-profit employment services must meet the needs of 100,000 young people who in June 2020 graduate from school or university with no guidance or scaffolds to transition into an uncertain world with less jobs.

The younger generation contributed much to the Covid-19 societal effort. Covid-19 travel restrictions will prevent migration from playing its historical safety valve option. The idea of a European Union Youth Guarantee was launched as part of the Irish 2013 European Union presidency. Piloted in Ballymun, a version could be developed as a part of post-Covid-19 recovery, with choice, quality and guidance as central operational principles (Wilson et al., 2020). Integrated services need to link employment supports with drug services, health and care providers, homeless services, etc.

In all of this, we need to treat young people not with suspicion but with respect. A divisive discourse is emerging which stigmatises and blames young people (Rabbitte, 2020). Others seek to consciously avoid the horrible narrative that some in receipt of the PUP ‘are somehow cheats, scroungers and spongers’ (O’Halloran and Clarke, 2020). If there are anomalies or work disincentives in the PUP, they are not a product of young people’s behaviour but outcomes and unintended consequence of well-meaning but necessarily hastily designed policy responses to the Covid-19 crisis. Political discourse about young people in receipt of the PUP is ‘a sideshow’: the real issue is the vulnerability and precarity of those workers in the most impacted sectors who may never regain such employment (Taylor, 2020).

Volunteer Ireland (2020) record that over two-thirds of those volunteering through the Covid-19 crisis are under 35 years of age, young people have earned our trust in rising to the challenge required of them in this crisis. We need to innovate to earn their trust, see them as a resource and listen to their knowledge and experience. Solidarity between generations must work both ways and over the long term. In this respect, we also need to think of the generations ahead of us. All of us, young and old, need to support decisive action on climate change and sustainable patterns of development (Steve and Evans, 2020: 5; Murphy and McGann, 2020).

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## Note

1. JobBridge was a National Internship Scheme that provided work experience placements for interns for a six- or nine-month period. Aimed at registered jobseekers, interns received a €50.00 per week to supplement their social welfare entitlement.

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