

## It's time to recognise the debt we owe to blighted Covid generation

Far from being demonised, young people should be applauded for the major sacrifices they have made

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**Y**oung people are fuelling the rise in coronavirus cases. So claimed the World Health Organisation this month, sparking a spate of headlines about the selfishness of the young.

Preston's council even warned young people “don't kill granny”, as though Britain's feckless youth were directly to blame for Covid-19 deaths through their insistence on working and socialising even in the midst of a global pandemic.

Such generational warfare may be commonplace, but it is far from accurate. The young are not the unpunished perpetrators of the Covid crisis. They are its forgotten victims.

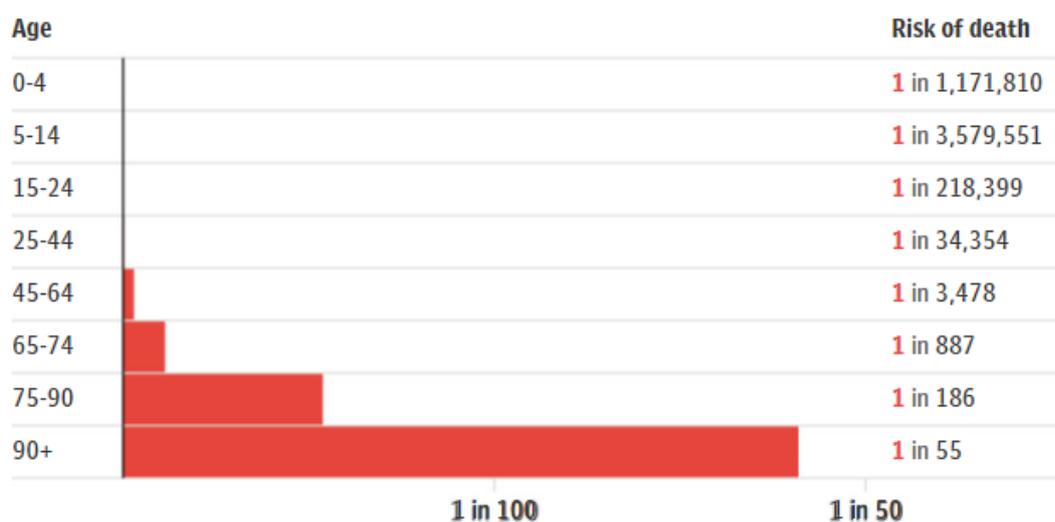
Let us start by remembering that the economic impact of Covid-19 and lockdown measures has pushed UK national debt above GDP for the first time in 60 years.

It now stands at a staggering £2 trillion – a sum future generations will be repaying for decades, in the form of increased taxes and reduced public services.

That burden may seem abstract now, but it will fall hardest on those who have already been left destitute by this crisis: the young.

When lockdown began, research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that under-25s were two and a half times as likely to work in a sector that had to shut down – such as retail or hospitality – as other age groups. They were particularly vulnerable, in terms of both sector and experience, to the job losses that followed.

### Risk of death from Covid-19 by age



As vast swathes of the economy were forcibly closed, companies made sweeping redundancies and withdrew entry-level job offers. Small wonder, then, that the number of people aged 18-24 claiming Universal Credit doubled during lockdown.

This is not a blip. Studies from multiple counties have found that those entering the labour market during a downturn don't just endure lower wages in the short term – their earning potential can be scarred for a lifetime.

According to the Resolution Foundation: “The corona class of 2020 could face years of reduced pay and limited job prospects, long after the current economic storm has passed.”

For those who have been lucky enough to have jobs, lockdown reality bears little resemblance to [the gushing narratives about remote working](#).

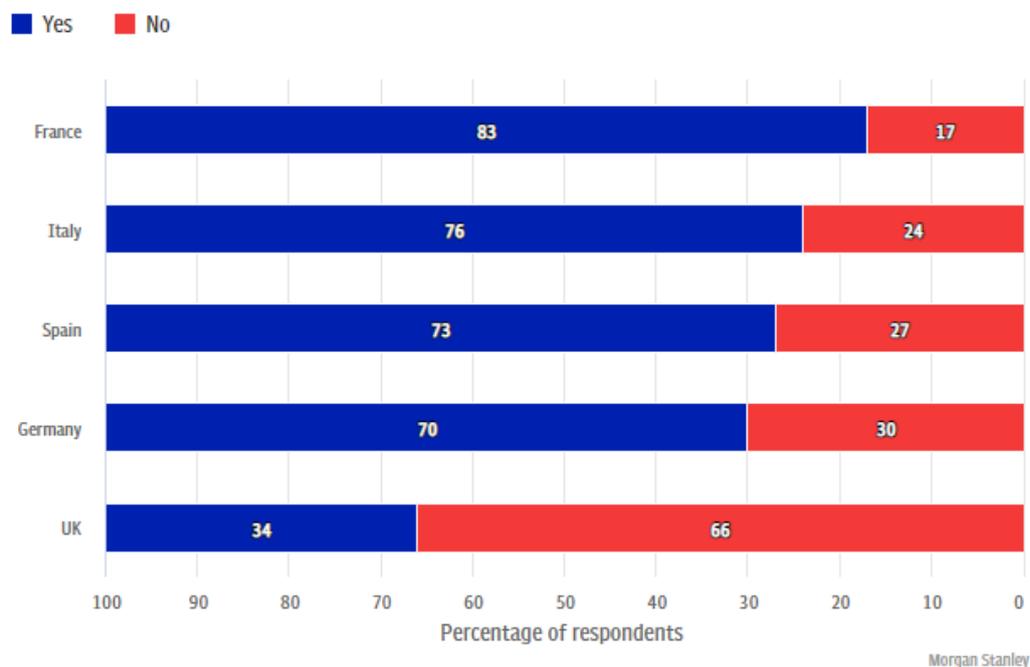
While CEOs and management consultants wax lyrical about the joys of working from their spacious houses and home offices, millions of millennials and Generation Z have been confined to their bedrooms.

Far from “working from home”, lockdown has been an exercise in living at work, balancing laptops on beds and spending 23 hours a day within the same four walls.

In fact, recent research from the London School of Economics and housing developer **Pocket Living** found that young Londoners in house shares have had on average just 9.3 sq m of private personal space during lockdown – about the size of a garage or prison cell.

## Have you now returned to working at your normal work location?

*Office workers only*



And while senior leaders may be in no hurry to return to the office, the young do not have that luxury. Those on the opening rungs of the career ladder have not yet had the opportunity to forge professional networks and are missing out on vital in-person experience.

The Covid generation are not only starting their careers in the middle of what the Bank of England warned could be the worst recession in 300 years, but are being denied the professional tools and workplace development necessary to progress.

Their health is at risk too. Last week, the Office for National Statistics revealed that one in five adults reported symptoms of depression, but shocking as this figure was, it rose to one in three among those aged 16-39.

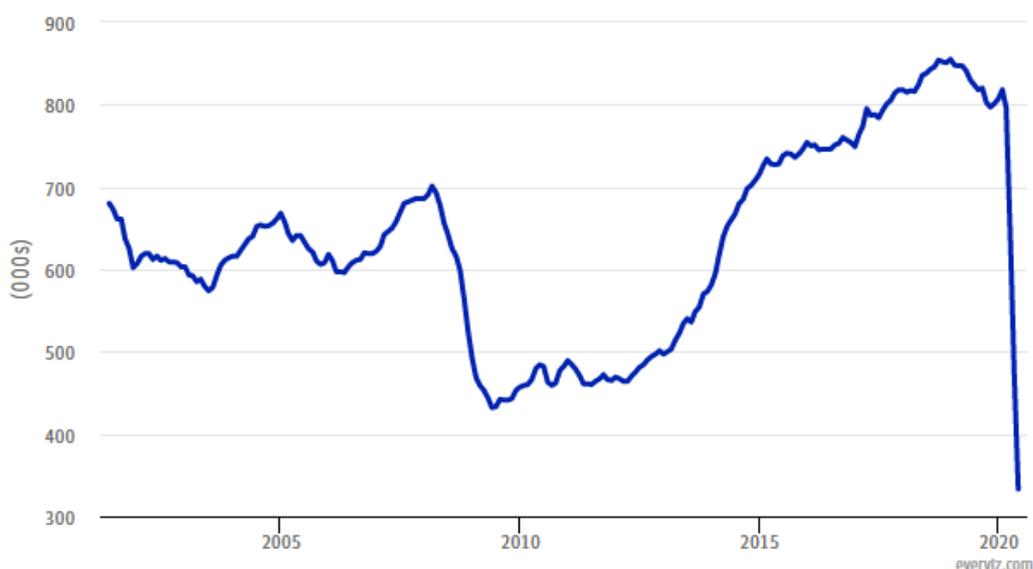
There are countless reasons why depression and anxiety may have spiked in this cohort in particular, but restricted space to live and work and a lack of workplace support are surely taking their toll.

Today's bosses cannot ignore the plight of their junior workers. Employers have a responsibility to recognise that working away from the office can be hugely detrimental to the mental health and future prospects of their young staff, and find ways to support them.

As for the Government, we need a new strategy that prioritises young people. Health policy has rightly focused on protecting the old and vulnerable, who are most at risk from Covid-19. Economic policy should do the same for the young, who have suffered the sharpest financial hit.

## No vacancies

*Job opportunities at an all-time low*



This needs to go beyond targeted initiatives to prevent mass youth unemployment. Rishi Sunak's Kickstart Scheme, which will pay the wages of newly hired under-25s for six months, is a good start – but it's not enough.

The economic cost will not just be borne by those struggling to find a job now, but by future generations of workers and taxpayers. Safeguarding them means ensuring the economy is dynamic enough to bounce back, rethinking regulation to allow businesses to adapt and entrepreneurs to find new areas for growth.

It also means keeping a constant eye out for ways to bring the spiralling debt under control. With the state pension forecast to increase by 7.6pc over the next two years – more than five times predicted earnings growth – it would be unconscionable not to rethink the triple lock. Struggling young workers have already put their financial well-being to one side to protect their elders; they should not now be forced to fund disproportionate pension rises too.

And despite [calls to extend the furlough scheme](#), there is little justification for artificially preserving jobs that are simply unviable in a post-Covid world, not when it costs £14bn per month to do so.

Most fundamentally, though, the narrative needs to change. Young people are not reckless individualists who are risking public health with their self-serving ways. On the contrary, they have sacrificed everything – their social lives, their well-being, their future careers and financial security – to protect the nation from a virus which generally is not a danger to them. If this sacrifice is not widely acknowledged, it is because they have done so without question or complaint.

Generational responsibility should work both ways. Now is the time to recognise the price the young have already paid – and ensure they are not paying it for the rest of their lives.