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# 'Left behind' north of the border? Economic disadvantage and intersectional inequalities in post-pandemic Scotland.

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Title: 'Left behind' north of the border? Economic disadvantage and intersectional inequalities in post-pandemic Scotland

Abstract:

UK media and political discourse has increasingly been dominated by concerns about the economic disadvantages experienced by post-industrial communities collectively labelled 'left behind' - and the deepening cultural fault-lines between them and wider society recent democratic events are said to have exposed. An overlapping narrative has re-cast many such communities as 'red-wall'/'blue-wall' constituencies, following the 2016 Brexit referendum and subsequent general elections - leading to a growing political focus on 'levelling up' infrastructural investment, employment and training opportunities to address economic inequalities between South-East England and much of the rest of the UK. To date, though, the primary political focus of these discourses has been on areas of northern and eastern England, the Midlands and Wales, with only a handful of contributions to the debate emphasizing the plight of comparably 'left-behind' areas of Scotland – notably an Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) report highlighting COVID-19's disproportionate economic impact on Scottish cities like Glasgow and Dundee with significant pockets of poverty (Davenport & Zaranko, 2020). This article draws on interviews with people from a range of disadvantaged groups in Scotland to explore how communities that have often been left out of the 'national conversation' about the 'left behind' are both experiencing economic inequality and starting to fight back - through incipient forms of grassroots 'DIY levelling up'.

Key words: left behind, disadvantage, intersectionality, inequality

## Introduction

This article uses semi-structured interviews and authored personal testimonies to explore the lived experiences of Scottish people from a range of diverse backgrounds who might be considered 'left behind'. In so doing, it draws on recent critiques of the 'left-behind' concept – which has generally been applied to economic and cultural disadvantages experienced at a *neighbourhood* or *area-wide* level, principally by post-industrial communities (e.g. Local Trust, 2019; Davenport & Zaranko, 2020) – to adopt a wider definition that associates it with the lived realities of individuals and households throughout society. The article therefore extends dominant diagnoses of what it means to be 'left behind' beyond their customary associations with the social deprivation, poor connectivity and weak civic engagement experienced by traditional working-class communities (often conceived as predominantly white) to recognize the precarity and prejudice experienced by a more multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan array of segments. Instead, it applies the definition of 'left-behind' groups adopted by the United Nations, which describes them as all those 'discriminated against due to identities and characteristics such as gender, age, disability, economic status, health status, mental health, race, religion, caste, geographic location, migrant status, nationality, statelessness, sexual orientation, criminalisation, being of a minority ethnicity or linguistic group, occupation, emergency-affected status and/or way of life' (UNICEF, 2021: 13).

In adopting this more expansive approach, the article aligns itself with others who have problematized the label 'left behind' as a monoethnic, at times stigmatizing, media, political and academic imaginary. By unpacking the multifaceted aspects of what it means to be 'left behind', it draws on the work of critical race scholars and sociologists who have offered more inclusive and representative conceptualizations of the casualties of today's 'digital gig economy' (Heeks, 2017) – from the (class and race-blind) 'precariat' (Standing, 2011) and 'emerging service workers' (Savage, 2015) to a multifaceted 'new working class' (Ainsley, 2018). The resulting interview sample included individuals from a range of (often intersecting) groups, from long-term unemployed people to refugees to those with chronic illnesses, disabilities and/or caring responsibilities inhibiting their ability to undertake paid employment. In exploring their lived experiences, the article proposes a tentative taxonomy of aspects of what it can mean to be 'left behind' – none of which are mutually exclusive.

These include being left behind by the welfare state; underfunded health and social care services; an inflexible and disabling job market; and a bureaucratic asylum system.

## Context

Much has been written in recent years about the socioeconomic and other characteristics of a vividly labelled, but hazily defined, social grouping: ‘the left behind’. Popularized by political scientists Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin to define ‘older, less skilled and less well educated working-class voters’ who were susceptible to the lure of right-wing populist parties (Ford & Goodwin, 2014: 10), the term has since been widely applied as a sociological shorthand for economically disadvantaged communities – particularly those in post-industrial towns and coastal areas seen to have been disproportionately impacted by changes in the economy, labour market and working-age social security (e.g. Becker et al, 2016; Hobolt, 2016). In the run-up to and aftermath of the 2016 European Union referendum, and during the subsequent two UK general elections, ‘the left behind’ provided a touchstone around which all major parties built campaign narratives (e.g. Corbyn, quoted in Stewart & Mason, 2019; Johnson, quoted in Hossein-Pour, 2019). The Conservatives’ capture of dozens of long-time Labour seats dubbed the ‘red wall’ in the 2019 election (Kanagassooriam & Simon, 2021) led to a victorious Boris Johnson publishing a Queen’s Speech promising to ‘level up’ infrastructure and opportunities to address widening economic inequalities between the prosperous South-East and ‘left-behind’ areas – primarily in northern England, Wales and the Midlands (gov.uk, 2019a: 12).

One of the most nuanced definitions of what it means for an area to be ‘left behind’ was offered in a 2019 report by the Local Trust, which identified three specific ‘domains’ beyond annually published government indices of deprivation or unemployment claimant counts that, occurring in combination, characterized such places. These were a lack of ‘civic, educational and cultural assets’, from pubs to libraries and swimming pools; weak ‘connectedness’ to public transport links, digital infrastructure and health services; and the absence of ‘an engaged community’, as demonstrated by a lack of local charities and other civil society actors (Local Trust, 2019: 9). Like other studies, the trust emphasized the ‘concentration of such left-behind areas in post-industrial districts in northern England and in coastal areas in southern England’ (ibid: 4-5). The All-Party Parliamentary Group for ‘Left

Behind' Neighbourhoods defines the concept in similar terms, envisaging it as a *community-level* – rather than *household-level* – condition, combining 'economic deprivation, poor connectivity, low levels of community engagement' and 'lack of community spaces and places' (appg-leftbehindneighbourhoods.org.uk, 2022). Others have adopted similar definitions, while arguing for the variation in underlying factors that lead to areas being 'left behind'. In a report published early in the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the economic case for 'levelling up', the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) described left-behind areas as 'characterised by broad economic underperformance, which manifests itself in low pay and employment, leading to lower living standards' (Davenport & Zaranko, 2020: 325). But it also stressed how the 'legacy of deindustrialisation or long-term unemployment' were only two of many 'deep-rooted socio-economic issues' that might underpin such problems (ibid).

Where definitions of what it means to be 'left behind' are seen as increasingly problematic is in arguing (to quote the Local Trust) that this condition is primarily 'a phenomenon of post-war social housing estates on the peripheries of cities and towns and predominantly white populations': communities, it argues, that have not 'traditionally been the focus of debate about deprivation', which 'tended to be multicultural and based in city centres' (Local Trust, 2019: 5). By contrast, one growing critique of the dominant 'left-behind thesis' has been that it *disproportionately* emphasizes issues affecting the white working class – at times to the exclusion of other economically disadvantaged groups, including those experiencing intersectional inequalities relating to race, ethnicity, disability and gender. A 2019 Runnymede Trust report emphasized how, 'rather than the "white working class" and "ethnic or migrant working class" living different or separate lives', there was 'significant overlap' in the 'everyday lived experiences' of these groups – including 'a shared experience' of 'precariousness' in housing, social security and employment, as well as 'race and class prejudice and contempt' (Snoussi & Mompelat, 2019: 4).

There is, then a growing recognition that traditional conceptualizations of 'the left behind' have been too narrowly focused on post-industrial white working-class communities and that they should be extended to encompass a wider, more representative range of (often overlapping) groups that have been 'left out' of the fruits of economic growth (Barbulescu et al, 2019). Moreover, as well as embracing more culturally and racially diverse groups – from disadvantaged Black, Asian and minority-ethnic (BAME) people to low-income immigrants – it is further argued that definitions of the 'condition' of being 'left behind' also

need widening to move away from ones that are spatially *situated* (as in conventional depictions of declining post-industrial areas) to encompass more *mobile* populations (author reference, 2022). These might include everyone from economically disempowered migrants and asylum-seekers to cross-class groupings like the universal ‘precariat’ (Standing, 2011).

Another key critique of the term ‘left behind’ is that it is the latest iteration in a long line of stigmatizing labels used to displace blame for poverty, unemployment and other forms of economic disadvantage onto those they affect (e.g. Golding and Middleton, 1982; author references, 2019 and 2022). Such discourses of the ‘deserving’ versus ‘undeserving poor’ stretch from late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century debates around ‘the residuum’ to ‘the underclass’ (Welshman, 2013) and Tony Blair’s ‘forgotten people’ (quoted in [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk), 1997). Moreover, narratives that emphasize the existence of ‘left behind’ *areas* risk falling into the trap of what sociologist Loic Wacquant calls ‘territorial stigmatization’ (Wacquant, 2008): an ‘Orientalizing’ discourse (Said, 1978) which frames whole towns or even regions as economically and/or culturally backward, even deviant. Indeed, such critiques of the left-behind concept (including those that have examined it in a non-UK context) increasingly problematize it less as an ‘economistic’ imaginary than one informed by a ‘culturalist’ (author reference, 2022) characterization of the features that distinguish such areas/groups from the rest of the polity: i.e. by framing them as both *economically* and *culturally* impoverished, and therefore insular and out of step with the onward march of more liberal, progressive, cosmopolitan values elsewhere (author reference, 2022).

#### Subverting ‘Scottish exceptionalism’: omitting Scotland from left-behind discourse

A less widely voiced criticism of ‘left-behind discourse’ within the UK context, but one that has recently gained traction, relates to its regional specificity: the disproportionate application of the term not only to white working-class communities but post-industrial towns and/or faded coastal resorts in the North of England, Midlands, Wales or on the east coast. Specifically, Scotland has consistently been left out of national conversations around left-behind Britain in all but a handful of important interventions. These include a notably early contribution to the literature on the socio-demographic and health characteristics of what it means to be ‘left behind’ which predated Ford and Goodwin’s crystallization of the term as a political concept. This emphasized the correlations between economically

‘deprived and declining areas in Scotland’ and poorer health outcomes, and how the outward migration from such areas of ‘more affluent and better educated individuals’ was likely to lead to ‘deprived and declining areas becoming even more deprived over time’ – while explicitly framing ‘stable residents’ who were ‘older, less well educated and less affluent’ as ‘left behind’ (Brown et al, 2012: 440). More recently, the IFS identified two Scottish cities, Dundee and Glasgow, as facing ‘the “double whammy” of being both “left behind” and vulnerable to the immediate economic fallout from the pandemic’ (Davenport & Zaranko, 2020: 316). Elsewhere, though, papers attempting to address the widespread omission of Scotland from dominant media and political discourses focusing on ‘the left behind’ have generally done so through a political, rather than economic or even cultural, lens – often identifying aspects of ‘Scottish exceptionalism’ in their comparative analyses of voting patterns between ‘left-behind’ areas north and south of the border (McCollum, 2020). Chief among these was a 2021 article based on focus groups and town-hall events contrasting voters’ views on populism in Remain-backing Scotland with those of the Leave-supporting West Midlands. This found that, while ‘notions of being “left behind” did have considerable traction’ among voters in post-industrial towns orbiting major metropolitan centres, like Birmingham, the researchers ‘did not find the same notion of being “left behind” in Scotland’ – partly because most Scottish respondents felt a responsive Scottish Government ‘countered the sense of a distant Westminster’ (de Ruyter et al, 2021: 518-9).

Whatever problems and inconsistencies remain in relation to the application of the term ‘left behind’ itself, however, there exists widespread agreement that the regional and sub-sectional forms of economic disadvantage it is commonly used to describe are genuine, and that structural inequalities are disproportionately concentrated in post-industrial towns, coastal resorts and their hinterlands – including in regions of England and Wales previously privileged by academics, politicians and media commentators. Moreover, many of these same towns and areas are those whose communities and local economies have been most heavily affected by COVID-19 and measures used to control it, as social geographer Danny Dorling (2020) and others have observed. As a result of the ever-evolving configurations of national and regional policy measures, many areas that spent the longest periods in full or partial lock-down closely corresponded or overlapped with cities, towns and their surrounds that had previously been identified as socially, economically and infrastructurally ‘left behind’ (e.g. Beatty & Fothergill, 2017). In Scotland’s case, as well as spotlighting Dundee

and Glasgow, the IFS identified isolated wards in ‘rural Scotland’ as being among ‘the most and second-most “left-behind” fifth of local authorities’ (Davenport & Zaranko, 2020: 331).

Giving a voice to the voiceless? Listening to ‘the left behind’

There is, then, a substantial emerging literature focused on *defining* the term ‘left behind’; *identifying* communities and areas that meet these normative definitions; and, increasingly, *critiquing* them – whether by querying the term’s over-preoccupation with the white working-class and particular geographical areas or its stigmatizing discursive associations (e.g. Bhabra, 2017; Barbulescu et al, 2019). To date, though, most studies have adopted ‘high-level’ and/or ‘outside-in’ approaches to *classifying* and *quantifying* ‘left-behind’ groups, deploying demographic data to detail the nature, scale and geographical spread of regional economic disadvantage (Beatty, Fothergill and Gore, 2019; Davenport & Zaranko, 2020) but failing to *humanize* those affected, by including *their own* voices rather than speaking ‘about’, ‘for’ or ‘on behalf of’ them. Moreover, where efforts have been made to engage directly with social actors, these have largely adopted the narrow conventional definition of what constitutes a ‘left-behind’ *community* – i.e. post-industrial (white) working class – instead of one offering insights into a more nuanced and representative cross-section of intersecting and/or coexisting ‘left-behind’ *groups*.

Of those projects which have engaged directly with ‘the left behind’, a number have focused on questions of *political* marginalization rather than *economic* disadvantage (even if first defining their target populations primarily in socioeconomic terms). These include the ‘left-behind’ voters interviewed for Ford and Goodwin’s now seminal *Revolt on the Right* (2014) and the Glasgow and West Midlands-based Remain and Leave-supporting focus-group participants of Brown et al’s post-referendum comparative analysis of the appeal of populist parties/campaigns (2021). The handful of studies that have challenged the limitations of the left-behind concept for reflecting the full range of groups subject to economic disadvantage have approached the subject from a critical race perspective, to question the homogeneity of dominant framings that privilege the ‘white working-class’ (e.g. Barbulescu et al, 2019; Snoussi and Mompelat, 2019; Rhodes, Ashe and Valluvan, 2019). Others who have used ethnography, interviews or deliberative methods to explore the lived experiences of people from identified ‘left-behind’ groups have sought to re-frame



the *complexity* of what it means to be (or to feel) 'left behind' by proposing alternative descriptors that are more meaningful to those affected, such as 'left out' (McKenzie, 2017; Barbulescu et al, 2019) or 'held back' (Local Trust, 2019).

For all the strengths of these studies, however, they were published in a world before COVID-19 – when debates around 'left-behind' communities were largely viewed through the prism of their (exaggerated) support for Brexit (McKenzie, 2017; Local Trust, 2019) and/or supposed mass defection to the Conservatives in 2019 (Davenport & Zaranko, 2020; Pitt, 2020). To date, only a handful of published studies have addressed the COVID experiences of groups historically defined as 'left behind', and these have tended to adopt either an international or non-UK focus (e.g. Dempster et al, 2020; Sullivan et al, 2020; Curtice & Choo, 2020; Vozikis et al, 2020). In a British context, work exploring the COVID experiences of economically disadvantaged groups has largely focused on people experiencing very specific forms of household-level inequality – irrespective of their geographical locations and/or the co-occurrence of other variables associated with the condition of being 'left behind'. In the Nuffield Foundation-funded project 'COVID Realities', Patrick et al used first-hand testimonies specifically sent in by low-income families with children to explore the impact of the pandemic and resulting social security interventions (nuffieldfoundation.org, 2020). This project also adopted a *UK-wide* lens – with limited coverage of households in Scotland. Similarly, the ESRC-funded project 'Welfare at a (Social) Distance' focused on benefit recipients' experiences of policy responses to the pandemic, again across the UK as a whole. While the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's annual *UK Poverty* reports have also addressed the impact of COVID on the lives of the 14.5 million people experiencing poverty prior to the pandemic, their focus has again been on Britain overall, with no granular consideration of the experiences of those in Scotland.

Of the notable projects that *have* explored the pandemic's impact on lower-income groups in Scotland, most have focused on one or more narrow segments. The most substantial to date has been the Glasgow Disability Alliance's *Supercharged: A Human Catastrophe*, informed by conversations with 5,000 respondents, which explicitly conceptualizes the position of disabled people as 'left behind' based on a range of criteria including their disproportionate experience of poverty, isolation, delayed or cancelled NHS treatments, and barriers to accessing benefits, social care and employment (Glasgow Disability Alliance, 2022). Others have included papers focusing on COVID's repercussions

for low-income families from both the Glasgow-based Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (iRiSS) and Child Poverty Action Group Scotland, and a further CPAG report spotlighting the experiences of Scottish-based migrants. However, no qualitative research to date has comparatively explored the lived realities of people from *multiple* inter-sectionally disadvantaged groups in Scotland, and in an *ongoing* context, and there has been little attempt to conceptualize such experiences specifically as forms of being ‘left behind’.

## Methodology

Semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour each were conducted with 18 people from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds who each had experience of economic and (in most cases) ‘intersectional’ inequalities – defined as ‘the peculiar disadvantages that arise as the result of occupying multiple disadvantaged demographic categories’ (O’Connor et al, 2019: 23). All respondents were experiencing, or had recently experienced, one or more of the following: long-term unemployment; precarious, low-paid and/or inflexible work; chronic physical or mental illness/disability; and/or full-time caring responsibilities limiting their ability to undertake paid employment. In addition, five were affected by intersectional disadvantages relating to ethnicity and/or race, and more than half the total (10) were women – five of whom were (or had been) single mothers.

Initial interviewees were purposively sampled through referrals from third-sector organizations working closely with disadvantaged groups: the Glasgow-based Poverty Alliance, Edinburgh-based Inclusion Scotland, and the Centre for Welfare Reform. Snowball sampling was then used to generate further interviewees based on peer referrals by those initially interviewed. In addition to the core 18-strong sample, three further interviews were conducted with civil society actors working with disadvantaged people in Scotland. These were two grassroots community-based charity workers and a foodbank manager from one of the 15 per cent most deprived areas in Scotland, according to the Scottish Indices of Multiple Deprivation (clacks.gov.uk, 2022). As COVID-19 restrictions were in place at the time, most interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom. However, provision was made for individuals unable to meet online due to digital access issues, who were instead interviewed by speakerphone and recorded on open-access software program Audacity. The use of Zoom proved helpful, in that it enabled the researcher to conduct interviews across a

much wider geographical area than might otherwise have been possible, given the limited resources available – with interviewees located across the central belt of Scotland, from Edinburgh to Glasgow and Clackmannanshire; as far south as Ayrshire; and as far north as Aberdeen. Using Zoom also allowed the researcher to schedule interviews flexibly around respondents living in unpredictable circumstances, including those who sometimes needed to reschedule at short notice due to fluctuating medical conditions or health and social care appointments, as well as the many individuals with caring responsibilities.

Of the 18 core interviewees, 10 were experiencing disadvantages primarily linked to long-term health conditions and/or physical disabilities; three were unemployed; three had histories of precarious, erratic and/or low-paid work; and two were refugees who had endured long periods of poverty while being processed through the asylum system. However, the categories into which individuals fell were far from clear-cut, with several disabled respondents suffering from co-morbidities and/or other intersectional disadvantages: for example, a man with a long history of demanding (if precarious) work had also spent lengthy periods unemployed and/or drawing disability-related benefits, while one refugee was both partially sighted and disabled with severe arthritis. In addition, many respondents self-identified as having mental health issues. They included a multiple sclerosis sufferer who had suffered from depression and anxiety and a woman with degenerative disc disease and a long history of caring for her disabled mother and children who had twice attempted suicide. More than half (including two men) had experienced prolonged periods when they had been the sole carer for one or more children and/or disabled relatives, thereby limiting their ability to seek or maintain paid employment.

All interviews were conducted on the understanding that transcripts would be anonymized. As a result, all the names used in this article are aliases and every effort has been made to remove any other information that could be used to identify individuals. Anonymity was important because of the vulnerable positions of most interviewees and the sensitive nature of issues discussed. In addition, given that many discussions involved exploring individuals' experiences of the benefits system, there was a risk of details being disclosed that might negatively impact their entitlements. Interviews were conducted throughout 2021, with three participants contributing further testimony in the form of authored accounts reflecting on their personal experiences. The project was funded by a grant from the Political Studies Association Research and Innovation Fund.

## Variations on the left-behind condition: towards a tentative taxonomy

Reflecting the various intersections and overlaps identified above, individuals' experiences of being 'left behind' generally related to at least one of the following four issues:

- Complexity, conditionality, unfairness and stigma in the benefits system
- Precarity, inflexibility and discrimination in the job market and workplace
- Cuts, delays and lack of responsiveness in health and social care services
- Bureaucracy and inadequacy of support in the asylum system

### *Left behind by the welfare state*

Numerous interviewees complained about the complexity and perceived unfairness of the UK social security system. As more than half of all respondents had long-term disabilities and/or health conditions, many recounted difficulties they had experienced accessing benefits – with several criticizing the officiousness of application procedures and, especially, the insensitive treatment they had received while being assessed to determine their eligibility through 'fitness-for-work' tests or work capability assessments (WCAs). Others complained about everything from delays in processing their claims to financial hardship caused by inadequate benefit levels and feeling patronized by job-centre staff and assessors. Brian<sup>1</sup>, a multiple sclerosis sufferer who receives personal independence payment (PIP) because he has trouble walking, said he was treated as if he was 'on the cadge', adding, 'they make you feel so bad trying to get what you're entitled to'. Glasgow-based Jane, a disabled single mother of four children (one with Asperger's Syndrome and another with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), said assessors who eventually awarded her employment and support allowance (ESA) treated her as if she was 'lying'. Similarly, Dennis, a middle-aged graduate who was made redundant after suffering a brain injury and became one of the first Scottish people to be moved from legacy benefits onto

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<sup>1</sup> To preserve anonymity, names used are pseudonyms unless otherwise stated

Universal Credit, described being 'met with hostility and indifference' by job-centre and housing staff – adding, 'if you're unemployed, you're worthless, you're a pain in the arse'.

One of the most vivid accounts came from Brian, who gave a detailed breakdown of the process by which he was eventually awarded only the lower rate of PIP, despite spending much of his life in chronic pain. 'I filled in all the paperwork – which is like *War and Peace*, sent it in, [and] hadn't heard anything for ages, so I rang them up and said, "oh, have you received my actual PIP report? Where do I go from here?"' he recalled. 'They said, "what report? We don't know anything about that", [so] consequently I filled it all in again, sent it off, [but] again I didn't hear anything'. Describing his assessment, he said:

I felt quite threatened, cos I had a taxi to the venue because it was quite a way from where I lived. I didn't know this, but they actually videoed me coming from the taxi into the centre. The first thing the assessor said was, 'I want you to climb up those stairs'. He said to me, 'get a bloody move on; I've got another appointment in a minute'...In the end, they awarded me the lower rate of PIP, and I was four points short of getting the enhanced rate. I didn't appeal against it because I thought, 'it's too much hassle'.

Andrew, aged 68, had a similar story of surveillance and questions apparently designed to trip him up on arriving for a WCA appointment. Recalling the trauma of being assessed for Invalidation Benefit (the precursor to ESA) after suffering back injuries, he said:

At that particular time, I still had a car. I had a blue disability badge...but there was no parking. I was in a very, very bad way and couldn't walk anywhere. I went to [a] carpark and had to phone a taxi to take me there. One of the people asked me, 'where did you park your car?' When I didn't get the money, I was told I wasn't getting it because I'd walked in excess of 200 yards to the assessment centre. I was struggling to sit for any length of time. I was struggling to stand for any length of time. I was in the meeting for more than an hour and I was told that I hadn't moved. I moved off that seat two or three times. You're not allowed to make a recording on your own mobile phone because that can be tampered with. What you've got to do

is take your own special machine. But the catch is that that machine is too big, so it's above the threshold – they test you for how much you can carry and, if you carry that in, you're over the weight...

Another frequent complaint was the impossibility of managing household budgets given the limits of individuals' benefit incomes – with many forced to make regular use of foodbanks as a result. Zaria, a 50-year-old single mother with degenerative disc disease and two disabled children, told how the struggle 'to make ends meet' was 'a constant thought in my mind', adding that winter 2021-2 had been 'one of the worst', as she had only been able to put her heating on 'for 20 minutes, half an hour max' and was reduced to telling her daughter to 'put another pair of socks on'. She said of the day of her interview:

I've not had anything to eat the whole day yet, apart from a cup of tea and pills...The only meal I have at night is one meal, but that doesn't fill me up enough, so I can't sleep at night sometimes because of that.

Contrasting her own position with that of her better-off parents, she added:

I just kind of feel sick that I've got to go and beg. My dad...asked me the question, 'do you go to the foodbank?' I said, 'no' - because I'm ashamed. He'd be ashamed. I thought, 'you guys are okay, you'll go to Marks and Spencer for your shopping and do a food shop. I'll be scrounging for yellow labels at the end of the day at a food market'.

Others shared evocative memories (not all negative) of times when they had found themselves in desperate financial straits with their children. Martha, in her 60s, had raised three children and a grandchild on out-of-work benefits, due to a combination of long-term conditions including epilepsy and a recurring spinal injury. She recalled a trip to Blackpool being 'the best holiday I ever had', in spite of her lack of money. Remembering how she had been 'literally stuck on the beach with three kids and 20 pound' – forcing her to go 'to the cheapest shops, the pounds shops' to get 'all the drinks' – she described the break as 'a

great weekend'. By contrast, unemployed father-of-two Andrew, who was his sons' sole carer for some years after his marriage broke down, recalled this sad memory:

There was two ice cream vans that used to come round and stopped right outside my door. The ice cream van stopped right outside and my wee boy said, 'can I get an ice cream?' And I literally had no money. Half an hour later another van came round again, and there's a wee boy over the way and he had been at the first ice cream van. My son said when he saw the ice cream van, 'can I have an ice cream'? I said, 'I've told you, I don't have any money'. Then my son said, and it broke my heart, 'Why do you hate us so much that you won't buy us an ice cream?' And that was the kick up the rear end to make me decide that living on benefits wasn't worth it...

For several participants, the indignities of having to rely on benefits were worsened by a sense that they had been stigmatized – including by the very agencies and advisers who were meant to be there to help them. Many individuals described dealings with institutions that had left them questioning their own attitudes, behaviours and motives for seeking support from the welfare state: accounts of psychologically traumatic encounters strongly redolent of gaslighting. Disabled mother-of-four Jane recalled how, at one point when her symptoms had been 'really, really bad' and she 'could not walk', she was made to feel that 'people didn't believe me' at 'the assessments'. MS sufferer Brian, who had been made to feel as if he was 'on the cadge' for claiming benefits, recounted a time he was forced to undertake unpaid work experience to avoid being sanctioned. When he complained about being exploited as 'cheap labour', a job-centre employee told him, 'you should be grateful for what you've got'. Reflecting on the strict conditionality of the benefits system, which initially saw him awarded the lower-rate jobseekers' allowance before being upgraded to disability-related payments, he added:

You're treated as if they're like the scum of the earth basically. And also...your own self-esteem goes really down in the pipes. I felt really depressed and anxious about everything. Especially if you're disabled as well, you're almost tarred with the brush that you're on the cadge. When I went through it and all the sort of technicalities

and the stupid questions that they ask you, I thought to myself, 'if this is somebody with a learning difficulty or something, they would have a nightmare', cos it's not done in plain English. They will ask you the same question four or five times in a different way, to try to trip you up. They asked me how many times I use Facebook in a week. What relevance is that?

Dennis recalled how, in 'every single interview' he had with disability advisers about problems caused by his brain injury, he ended up having to explain to *them* how to make workplaces more 'accessible'. A combination of lack of meaningful, suitably tailored support and indifferent, patronizing or hostile attitudes from people who were meant to be assisting him had compounded his difficulties – leaving him 'at the end of my tether':

You internalize it: you tell yourself, 'obviously I'm not worth investing in'. It basically detracts from your self-belief to the point that you're basically in the gutter.

#### *Left behind by the job market and workplace*

Many interviewees with long-term illnesses and disabilities told how, at times when they had tried to find jobs or continue working, despite their conditions, employers had failed to provide them with accessible hours and/or work-stations. Some also recounted experiences of outright discrimination in the workplace or job market – from tales of being teased or bullied for not being 'like' their peers to being rejected for vacancies because of assumptions that their disabilities would impede their performance. MS sufferer Brian recounted how, though he was 'getting interviews', he would be turned down for jobs 'because they saw me with a stick' – adding that one firm told him he was 'a liability':

Sometimes on application forms there's a two-tick sign, which basically means you're guaranteed an interview. That's a load of tosh. A lot of companies use it [to exclude people]. 'Oh, you've had a brilliant interview, but we can't take you on'. I always ask for feedback. Body language: you can read them like a book. Just a shrug



of the shoulders and, 'well...' They almost grimace when you turn up. They do everything in their power to not to let you have that interview in an accessible place.

Unemployed student Ahmed, who was forced to take a break in his university studies to help share caring responsibilities for his disabled siblings with his deaf mother, blamed her thwarted efforts to find work, in part, on a feeling that employers had weeded her out because of her disability. 'She had some qualifications that indicate that she's deaf...and I feel like she, um...I feel like employers know she's deaf', he said, adding:

She did go to one interview and she didn't get it and the employer didn't really explain the reason why. They said that...she's not qualified – she didn't have enough experience – and she *did* actually have quite a lot of experience for that position. They didn't say that it was because she was deaf, but that was the reason.

Others had experienced discrimination and prejudice in the workplace itself. Geoff, a profoundly deaf former accountant, told how he had been criticized at work by a manager who asked why he could not just 'be like' a hard-of-hearing colleague when he asked for technical adjustments to enable him to work more effectively. 'When they changed over to inequality stuff, I think people started to panic – get rid of all the disabled people', he said. 'My boss, my line manager, says, "why don't you be more like [colleague's name]?" But I'm not like him: I'm profoundly deaf'. He experienced similar inflexibility from job coaches when forced to seek work again after being made redundant. 'I need somebody to pick up a phone for me, [but] nobody would do it', he recalled, adding that, though he 'got lots of emails from people interested' in him, 'the level of interest just dropped like a cliff' and they said, 'I'm sorry, you're not suitable for the job' as soon as they 'found out' he was deaf.

Dennis, the graduate with the brain injury, recalled how his last job had ended when he was 'paid off' by his employer, partly because it was unwilling to invest in technology he needed to continue doing his job after contracting encephalitis. Brian also had bad memories of his last workplace (a charity), recalling how he had been forced to quit because a manager was 'bullying the life out of me', causing him 'stress and anxiety' that worsened his symptoms.

Other issues inhibiting interviewees' ability to seek or secure work ranged from lack of childcare and inflexible hours to racism. Andrew, the single dad who had worked sporadically between bouts of unemployment caused by multiple back injuries, said the main barrier to work when he was raising his sons alone was that he 'had to work at 4.30 in the morning' and needed a live-in childminder, but 'wasn't getting helped' because 'it was so difficult getting somebody to live in' in the 'small village' where he lived. Other parents described how they had lost out financially by going back to work because additional earnings were cancelled out by the withdrawal of out-of-work benefits. Though mum-of-four Jane had been able to return to college because her mother was helping with childcare after being made redundant during the pandemic, this meant she had lost £150 a month in carers' allowance – despite the fact that her overall 'caring responsibilities' had not changed: 'If you're doing 21 hours [work] you lose it, and I do exactly 21 hours'. Physically disabled Zaria, who is of Pakistani heritage, told how her two grown-up children were 'desperate for jobs', but (like her) found it extremely difficult because 'there's so much competing':

Why can't we get a job? Is it because of the colour of my skin? I just have to keep encouraging [children] and saying 'no, don't think that - just keep going'...It's the same with disabled people. A lot of disabled people want to work – they want to do something – but they just can't get a job. What really annoys me is that a lot of companies say, 'we're an equal opportunities employer', but I think, 'you're not – so please take that down'.

Others described lives of in-work poverty that had little to do with disability or illness and everything to do with precarity and iniquities in the contemporary gig economy. Konrad, an eastern European migrant, spent years battling with alcoholism, seizures and severe mental health symptoms while living in a hostel and 'constantly working' to make ends meet – often juggling multiple jobs, from construction to cleaning to 'flipping burgers'. 'I was working 50-60 hours a week', he recalled. 'I went to the hostel, which provided me with free stay if I cleaned it for several months'.

Similarly, Tony, a community activist in one of Scotland's most deprived local authority wards, recalled how he had started his working life at the age of 16, enduring

overnight shifts in an Indian takeaway while sleeping rough, after being kicked out of his family home by his mother's partner. 'I didn't have any drugs problems – the only issue I had was that I didn't have anywhere to sleep', he recalled, adding that he went out to share his house with others, 'all of whom lived for their next giro, smoked hash and drank, but...I suppose I aspired to better'. Similar tales of precarity were relayed by other people involved in grassroots activism. A Glasgow-based community worker, who spent several years as a young man 'scraping by' as a roofer, then a fast-food shift worker, recalled the realization that he was one of the exploited 'working poor' after suffering a workplace injury over which his manager showed little concern:

There was an incident where...I'd slipped in the kitchen. This is at the start of a shift. My arm felt sore. As the night went on, I realized I was going to have to get it seen to. I'd broken my arm. I came in on the next shift with my arm in a sling and I told my manager, 'look, this is almost impossible'. I said, 'I can't do this, I'm going to have to take time off'. The only options that were communicated to me was that I was going to have to take my holiday pay to take the rest of the week off. I had no idea that I'd be entitled to any sick pay. Even after that it was not really healed. Looking back, [it] really grinded [sic] me down for being stuck on the night shift. I remember one time just sort of breaking down in my flat. I wouldn't class it as 'poverty', but looking back that's exactly what it was – virtually no money to do anything.

### *Left behind by health and social care services*

Exacerbating many of the issues individuals faced in the benefits system and workplace were deficiencies they experienced in health and social care provision. While several people highlighted longstanding problems accessing specialist equipment or treatments, others stressed how years of austerity followed by the COVID-19 pandemic had degraded their quality of life, by leading to the closure of day-centres and structured leisure activities. Kirsty, who trained in medicine but was forced to give up her career because of severe epileptic seizures, observed how 'quite a few NHS services', such as appointments to see specialist nurses, 'seem to have stopped', while Martha, a former personal trainer whose career had also been interrupted by a relapse in her epilepsy, mentioned 'cutbacks' to

‘community centres’ that offered ‘meals and all that for people with severe disabilities’. ‘People with issues...need somewhere to go – they need someone from a similar background, so they can talk’, she said. While communication tools like Zoom were useful, for those who could access them, ‘it’s not the same as seeing somebody smiling’. Jane lamented that there were no longer clubs for her ‘wee boy’ with autism, as services were so ‘overstretched’ that they had ‘terrible’ waiting lists.

Summing up the plight of several participants who were locked in stressful, multidirectional caring relationships – from university student Ahmed, who had paused his studies to help his mother care for his disabled siblings, to mother-of-two Zaria, who had spent much of her life caring for her sick mother and now had two children of her own with disabilities – Martha highlighted the plight of ‘hidden carers’. Describing her own circumstances, she outlined a complex matrix of caring responsibilities, in which her own ‘main carers’ were her children but the whole family had long ‘worked as a team’. In addition to having brought up a son with epilepsy (who had become a father aged 17), she continued to be the primary carer for her grandson, whom she had reared ‘since he was two’, and her own grown-up daughter, who had bipolar disorder and schizophrenia:

There’s so many out there that nobody sees. I was a young carer myself. In my mental state I watched my kids and myself. We’re talking 50 years apart. There’s still young carers that are not getting any help. You think about young carers who lose their carer component and what are they going to do? Young carers weren’t born to be carers. If we’re older and we’re in a relationship, we’ve had our life. Young carers get so much taken away from them. When it came to my daughter, she was expected to help – not the boys – by the social workers...

### *Left behind by the asylum system*

In addition to being left behind by the benefits system, the job market and/or health and social care services – and, in some cases, all three – the intersectional disadvantages experienced by two interviewees had a further dimension. These were both individuals who had originally entered the UK as asylum-seekers and had only latterly been granted refugee status after protracted applications processes and long periods of near destitution. One

refugee, Rosemary, had fled her home country, leaving her children with relatives, after receiving death threats from government agents for daring to campaign for the opposition. She recalled how, after initially being granted the standard £37-a-week Home Office food voucher for people seeking asylum, she was left penniless for two years while her claim was disputed – and only survived by relying on friends for handouts and electricity top-ups:

[For] two years of my asylum journey I wasn't getting anything. I was just surviving with foodbanks. No money. No money. Not even a penny. No money. Even the [electricity] top-up they weren't accepting me to do that because I didn't have money from the government. I was lucky because I wasn't chucked out of the [YMCA-owned] house. They didn't change the lock on my door, but to others they were doing that. They were changing locks for people who are destitute. My friends would come and say, 'okay, £10 to top up your electricity', so life would be going on.

Single mum Anna, who was forced to leave home to save herself and her teenaged daughter from genital mutilation by the family of her late husband, outlined a tortuous asylum journey marred by procedural errors during which she struggled to feed her children:

We didn't survive really. We were just living in poverty, I'd say...The money was for feeding, but there was no money for toiletries, there was no money for clothing, there was no money for shoes for the children. The money was not enough. I had to visit foodbanks on a weekly basis. The children could not have access to opportunities that would give them social access.

Anna, who has two sons, aged 17 and 10, and a 15-year-old daughter, described how, after the Home Office initially denied her application, she took her lawyers' advice to fight its decision on a point of law. However, only after successive tribunals and pursuing a judicial review did she eventually triumph. A key item of evidence that nearly derailed her case was a simple clerical mistake: a letter from a social worker confirming that she and her daughter would be in danger if they returned home was initially disregarded because it erroneously referred to her as 'Mr' rather than 'Mrs'. By the time her account was eventually accepted,

her daughter had become so traumatized by the prospect of being forced to return home that she had been referred to counselling for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Green shoots from the grassroots? Signs of DIY levelling up?

While all the above stories describe lives of struggle, hardship and often lengthy periods of isolation (invariably worsened by restrictions imposed to control the pandemic), in many testimonies there were heartening glimpses of resilience and a determination to fight back. This resilience was often articulated in terms of how ‘communities’ of which individuals were part were pulling together – in the absence of sufficient support from government or its agencies – to support one another and improve their collective social (and, in some cases, physical) infrastructure, through forms of ‘DIY levelling up’. However, the nature of this sample and the often isolated individuals it contained meant that the ‘communities’ they inhabited were not always spatially situated: i.e. particular to specific neighbourhoods, towns or even regions. Instead, they often took the form of geographically dispersed communities of *experience* and/or *interest*, centred around commonalities of circumstance relating to disability or other disadvantages, and facilitated (often using online means) by charities/NGOs with whom they were in contact. Given the profiles of the participants, these charities primarily included the Poverty Alliance and Inclusion Scotland, as well as the Black Triangle Campaign for disability rights. It is of course highly possible that, had access to interviewees been gained through alternative avenues, the forms of DIY levelling up (and, indeed, lived experiences) explored through interviews might well have been different.

Specific endeavours people described spoke to a spirit of sustained collective action to plug gaping holes in social care and wider public services caused by years of austerity, as well as deficiencies in retail and other sectors that had been sharpened by the pandemic. Community activist Tony detailed various grassroots initiatives launched by local people at the height of the pandemic, when housing associations and external agencies previously involved in high-profile (but often unfulfilled) rejuvenation projects pulled out due to COVID-19 restrictions. Among these innovations was a 26-mile daily surplus ‘food run’ around Renfrewshire using a van crowdfunded through a GoFundMe page; a weekly community market; and a ‘Reduce, Reuse, Recycle’ scheme, which enables hard-pressed families on his estate to obtain everything from school uniforms to Hallowe’en costumes for

a fraction of the prices charged on the high street or online. Describing how a housing association used to pay a private contractor £58,000 a year to mow the estate's 'village green', he explained how, during COVID, this was done for free by two unemployed locals – one of whom had spent the months leading up to the pandemic 'living in abject poverty', unable to 'feed himself' and 'with no gas or electricity', after 'a family breakup':

We've had 40 years of regeneration and none of this has ever been done, and yet people were left to their own devices for 18 months and came up with all these solutions. These communities had it right all along, but they've been consistently socially engineered into believing they were the problem.

Others detailed small, but significant, ways in which communities of experience in which they were involved stepped in to provide services that the state had reduced or withdrawn due to cuts, COVID-19 or both. Disabled graduate Dennis told how it had initially been difficult for him to buy food during the pandemic 'because I live in a tower block' and 'nobody delivers to tower blocks'. However, this changed when he learned of a home delivery service offered by a local charity, which enabled him to avoid being forced to either shop online (which he finds difficult) or head out to buy groceries when he was meant to be shielding. Food delivery services were also highlighted by many of those providing support. A foodbank manager explained how, in contrast to the pre-pandemic period – when nine out of ten parcels had been collected in person by the charity's beneficiaries – nearly all supplies were dropped at people's homes during COVID. The scope of the charity's work had also extended well beyond handing out food, to joining forces with other third-sector organizations to run rudimentary services that would traditionally have been funded and/or delivered by statutory social care providers. Recent innovations included a community café and meals-on-wheels provision for isolated elderly people. 'The aim is to provide a welfare service too, because social services don't do it now', she explained.

Left behind or swept aside? Systemic failings and the limits of 'Scottish exceptionalism'

As explained previously, most interviewees qualified as 'left behind' not because they necessarily lived in particular towns or neighbourhoods that met the narrower demographic

definitions often applied to this term – that is, post-industrial, traditional working class and/or predominantly white – but because, as individuals, they had been materially and economically disadvantaged. That said, the sample *did* include people based in areas that would be characterized as ‘left behind’ by almost any measure. These ranged from Ferguslie Park in Paisley – whose last major employer (a car factory) closed in 1981 – to east Ayrshire, whose coalmining and cotton industries have long since vanished and where, even today, 17.6 per cent of households are classified as ‘workless’, compared to 13.6 per cent for the UK as a whole, and disproportionate numbers of economically inactive people are either on long-term disability-related benefits or unable to work because they care for sick or disabled relatives (Nomisweb, 2022a). Many other interviewees also shared stories about the loss of business and industry in their own neighbourhoods over time and the impact this had had on local communities. Steven, a middle-aged man forced to give up work due to a stroke, talked of the closure of car factories in his deprived Glasgow ward. Frances, who lives alone in social housing in Dundee, where 19.5 per cent of households are ‘workless’ – six per cent more than the national average (Nomisweb, 2022b) – lamented similar losses in her area. ‘When I was little, I remember we did that thing at school of “where does your dad work?”’, she said, adding, ‘kids would say their dads were in factories or lorry drivers’ and she could not recall anyone ‘saying they had an unemployed dad’.

However, what *all* the interviewees had in common, *wherever* they happened to live – from post-industrial Paisley to Britain’s on-off richest city, Aberdeen (Buchan, 2019) – was a shared experience of economic disadvantage; frequently exacerbated by intersectional inequalities relating to disability, ethnicity and/or gender. Almost every individual had had past or ongoing experiences of precarious, inflexible or disabling work environments. Everyone had suffered at the hands of officious and/or underfunded social care and social security systems: ‘safety nets’ that ostensibly existed to support and protect them.

Taken together, these experiences raise a number of questions around dominant discourses to date about both what it means to be, to feel or to be described as ‘left behind’. Firstly, they challenge the near-exclusive preoccupation of UK media and political narratives with post-industrial areas of northern England, the Midlands and Wales – by demonstrating how complex and deep-seated economic disadvantages are also prevalent in Scotland; whether experienced at individual household level, *throughout* society, or in the form of localized pockets of poverty relating to the oft-discussed impacts of



deindustrialization. Secondly, they add to the growing body of research literature which rightly problematizes the 'left-behind' imaginary, emphasizing how it is primarily a term used to define and/or stigmatize disadvantaged groups by others, including politicians – not all of whom always have their best interests at heart. As one charity worker put it:

'Left behind' is a terminology that is defined by others, because no one *wants* to be left behind. It's [about] understanding the reasons why some sections of society are left behind. It could be structural barriers within the employment sector [affecting] people from different racial backgrounds [and/or] the challenges of finding a job that suits their care responsibilities, their skill sets, their health issues as well.

In demonstrating the degree of marginalization and stigma felt by many interviewees, the data also raises difficult questions about the extent and limits of 'Scottish exceptionalism' – an issue previously debated in *Scottish Affairs* (e.g. McCollum, 2020). It is significant that the *experiences* relayed were all ones individuals had had in Scotland, under procedures administered by Scottish-based officials – even if the *policies* on which many of them were based (notably those relating to social security and asylum) had been imposed under reserved powers held by Whitehall and Westminster. Interviewee after interviewee had stories about feeling disbelieved, patronized and/or belittled by job advisers or disability assessors and, significantly, almost every respondent with a long-term illness or disability had had to fight for their benefits, or at least the higher-level entitlements for which they were eligible – by contesting initial assessments made by locally based DWP officials, whether through 'mandatory reconsiderations' or full-blown appeals (gov.uk, 2022). Whatever the future holds for Scotland's post-industrial communities, it is to be hoped that prospects for the wider range of segments currently 'left behind' by its benefits system, if nothing else, will be positive – given the progressive principles enshrined in the fledgling Scottish Social Security Charter, which has pledged 'respect for the dignity of individuals' and a commitment to 'reducing poverty in Scotland' (Scottish Government, 2018).

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