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# Young people in Oxford's disadvantaged areas: Understanding the issues they face and the role of youth work

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## Author Bios

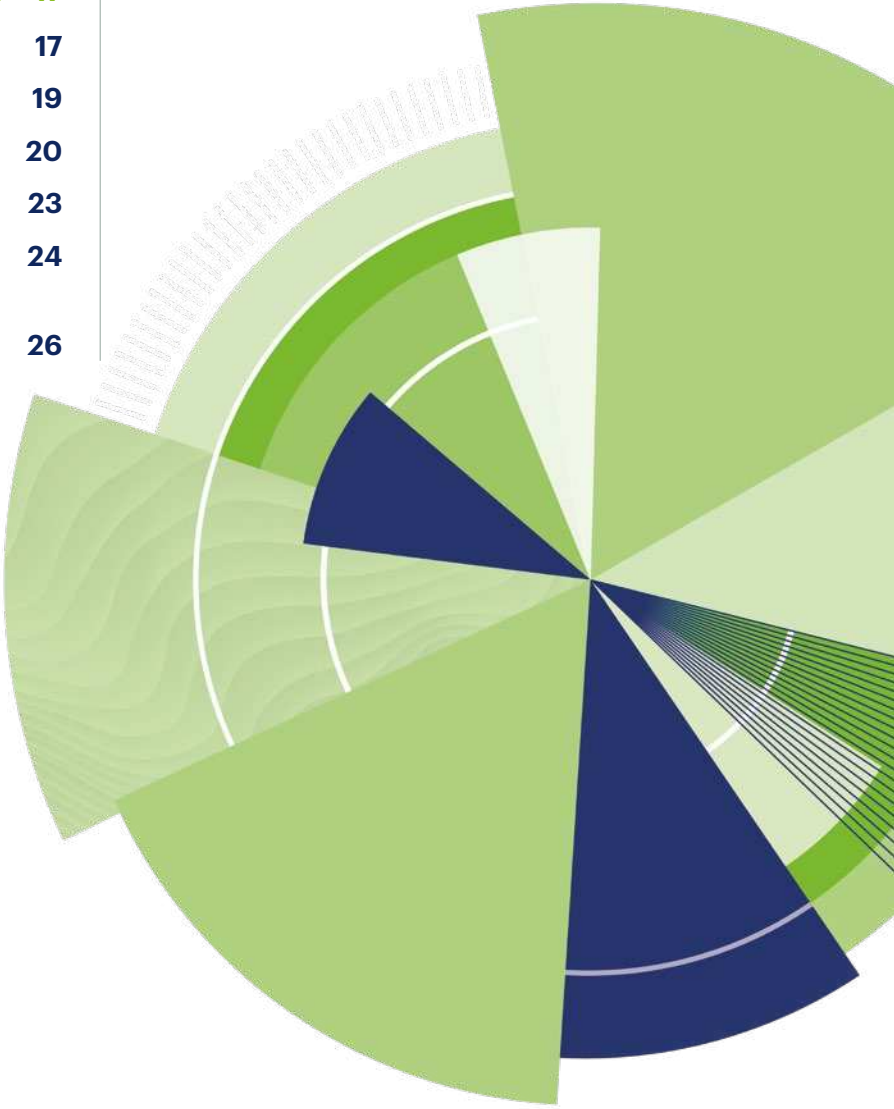
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The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the University of York, or Oxford Youth Ambition which is part of Oxford City Council.



## FOREWORD

We would like to express our gratitude to the University of York for the chance to work on this research report and to the youth workers and youth participants. Social pressures that maintain austerity are growing, which worsens inequality, especially in areas where people are more deprived.

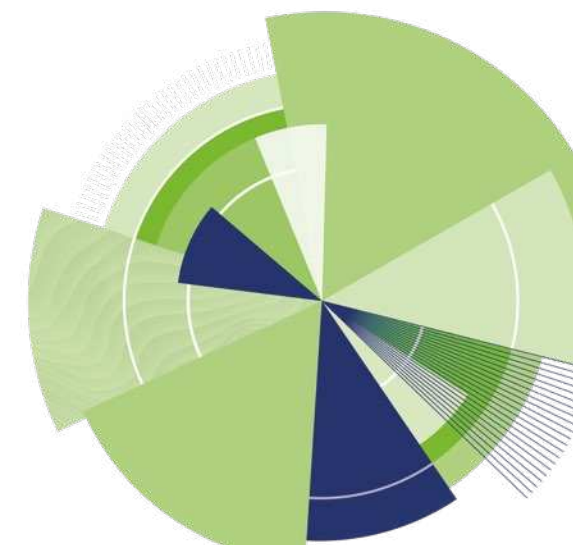
Oxford City Council's Thriving Communities Strategy focusses on collaborating with Oxford's communities and partners to enable all residents to live their lives to the full. Improved life chances for young people is one of the goals that the strategy strives to achieve, mainly through the Youth Ambition programme. Therefore, in order to improve the lives of young people in Oxford, especially those who live in less affluent parts of the city, we must have a greater understanding of the problems they face. This report is timely since it provides us with new and meaningful insights post-Covid-19 pandemic. We can use the findings to modify and improve services to better meet the needs of our disadvantaged young people.

The report explores young people's perspectives on Oxford's challenges living in the deprived wards, to which they shared problems in relation to living costs, housing, education, crime, youth work, and the need for improved conditions for disadvantaged youth. Although youth work in Oxford still plays a significant role in helping young people with some of the issues they face, we must acknowledge the financial strain on third-sector youth groups and keep advocating for the importance of informal engagement in the growth and well-being of underprivileged young people, as reaffirmed in this report by youth workers and young people, as well as the need for more youth provision that provides well-being and life skills support and sporting activities.

In light of all of this, partnership working will be essential in collaborating with the services associated with areas in which young people have voiced concerns and ensuring that any support strategy is based on youth work principles, which has been central to the success of the Youth Ambition programme.

### Oxford Youth Ambition<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> If you would like to find out more about Youth Ambition, please see the following link: <https://www.oxford.gov.uk/oxford-youth-ambition>





# SUMMARY

## Part 1

- This report is primarily based upon a collaborative research project between the University of York and Oxford Youth Ambition. This involved 6 focus groups (FGs) with young people (YP) aged 11-19 in Oxford's disadvantaged areas; a youth workers workshop involving various tasks and 2 FGs with youth workers; and an online survey aimed at YP in Oxford. Overall, data was collected from 57 YP and 18 youth workers (N=75).
- Key research questions were based upon exploring the problems that the YP face in the disadvantaged areas of the city, and what can be done about it particularly in relation to youth work.
- The research is pertinent and timely, particularly considering how there is a lack of primary research in pockets of deprivation within affluent cities.
- Oxford contains the UK's most highly educated workforce (74.3% of the working-age population possess high-level qualifications); and wages are relatively high (full time weekly gross pay is £780.2; the UK average is £729.8).
- Oxford is the UK's 2nd most unequal city, containing various social problems. For example, the cost of privately renting a house reached a record high recently (£1,798, January 2025); over a quarter (28.4%) of its children are living in poverty; and 9 of its neighbourhoods are in England's top 20% most income deprived.
- There is an acute geographical dimension to Oxford's inequality. Whilst the most affluent areas are largely situated in the north of the city, the most deprived localities are primarily located in the south.
- As the city is relatively small, affluence and deprivation sit in very close proximity including street-by-street.
- Austerity negatively affected Oxford – Oxford City Council lost around £7mn in central government funding across 2012-22.
- Although youth work across the country including in Oxford has been impacted by national budget cuts, Oxford City Council has attempted to ameliorate this through implementing the Youth Ambition Programme in 2015 which ensures youth provision and supports disadvantaged YP across the city.

## Part 2

- The primary research findings focussed on 6 key themes – growing up in Oxford, education, crime, housing, youth work and what Oxford needs to be a better place for its disadvantaged YP.
- Research participants emphasised the positive aspects of growing up and living in the city, suggesting it was a better place to live than larger cities such as Birmingham (80 miles north of Oxford).
- Inequality structured the YP's experiences of Oxford, suggesting there were certain places such as the universities which were not for people like them.
- Secondary schools were viewed less favourably – staff turnover was high and there was a perceived lack of resourcing to support its YP.
- Especially acquisitive crime like shoplifting was normalized in some of the city's disadvantaged areas. There was also an ever-present risk of many YP being drawn into illegal drug markets.
- Knife crime and gangs were regarded as a problem, with many knife enabled crimes occurring close to where some of the YP lived.
- Many YP were aware that housing in Oxford is very expensive, presenting problems for their aspirations of living in the city in later life.
- Given these very high housing costs, some of the city's older YP had very little disposable income left after paying their rent.
- Youth work was regarded positively and deemed important to the development and wellbeing of particularly disadvantaged YP.
- Youth work in Oxford played an important role in trying to address some of the problems that its disadvantaged YP faced – however, in light of funding cuts and insufficient staffing there is scope for it to play a much broader role.
- There was an ingrained belief amongst the youth workers that youth work is in a precarious and very difficult situation, primarily due to austerity over the past decade or so.
- Many youth organisations were in organisational survival mode. Stressed and worried about the future, youth workers were compelled to constantly bid for funding to survive.
- The YP outlined a range of ideas to improve Oxford's disadvantaged areas. This particularly included for their youth provision to offer more sporting activities, life counselling, skills development and mental health support.

# RESEARCH APPROACH

This research was granted Ethical Approval (SPSW/S/24/23) through the Social Policy and Social Work Ethics Committee at the University of York. The research project was conducted in collaboration with Oxford Youth Ambition, a non-statutory service provided by Oxford City Council that provides youth provision such as youth clubs, employment and skills support, and sporting activities to YP aged 11-19 across Oxford’s disadvantaged localities. Youth Ambition enabled access to the research participants, with the project based upon both exploring the problems that YP face in Oxford’s disadvantaged areas and identifying ideas that would help to improve YP’s livelihoods particularly in relation to youth work. Data collection occurred across November 2024-January 2025 and involved three key aspects:

- 6 FGs with YP aged 11-19 in Oxford’s disadvantaged areas. These FGs ranged in size from 6 to 13 participants and were conducted with both a youth worker present and co-facilitated by Luke and Leonard. 5 FGs were conducted face-to-face, with the other one online on Microsoft Teams. Various techniques were used to facilitate data collection, including post it notes, agree/disagree statements and

writing down 3 words to describe Oxford. 46 youth participants took part in these FGs. This involved 23 girls and 23 boys. The ethnicities of the YP were diverse (see Appendix.1). All of these respondents were awarded a £20 Amazon voucher as a thank you payment for their time.

- A 3-hour professionals’ workshop with 18 youth workers who mainly work in the Voluntary and Community sector across Oxford. This involved an individual Mentimeter task, group-based flip-chart activities and 2 FGs.
- An online, anonymous qualitative survey aimed at YP aged 11-19 in Oxford’s disadvantaged areas. This was live for several weeks and shared with youth workers by Youth Ambition. It was intended to gather further responses from YP who Youth Ambition do not have contact with. Although it elicited a small number of responses – 11 – it added further detail to the research findings.
- Key ethical principles were embedded in the research. Informed consent and, where applicable, assent were obtained from the participants. Anonymity and confidentiality of the data have also been ensured. All disadvantaged places in Oxford have been pseudonymized to protect their identity.

Research Participants	Research Sample
YP aged 11-19 (FGs & survey)	57
Youth Workers (workshop)	18
Total	75

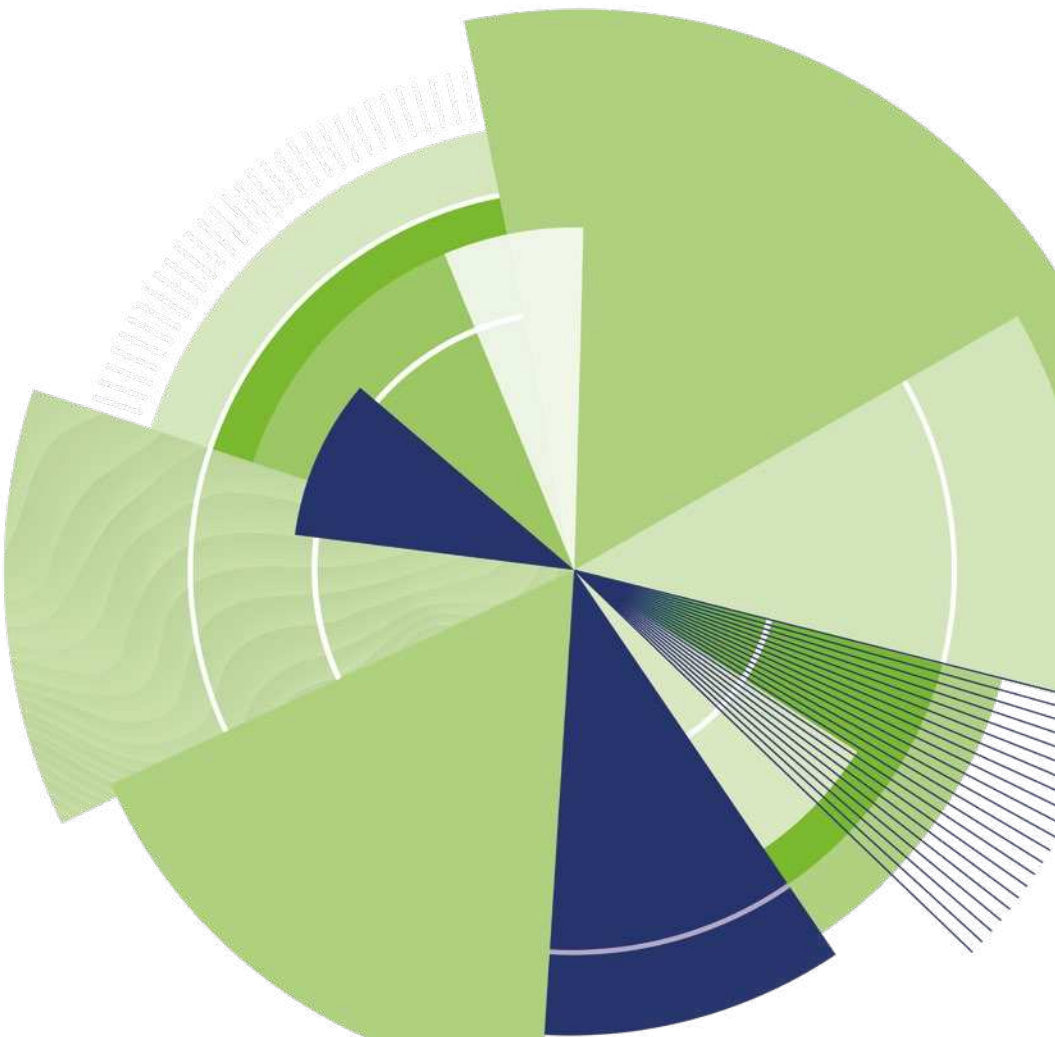
# INTRODUCTION

This report is structured into three parts:

**Part 1** offers important context to the report, documenting the key social, economic and cultural conditions in Oxford. As such, it outlines population data and how the city scores well nationally on various metrics including containing relatively high average wages. However, it also evidences how Oxford is a highly unequal city with affluence and deprivation existing in very close proximity. This inequality shapes the lived experiences of its YP, particularly in relation to education and living standards. Part 1 also explores how the city has been affected by austerity.

**Part 2** documents the primary findings from the collaborative research project. It hinges upon 6 key themes – growing up in Oxford, education, crime, housing, youth work and what Oxford needs to be a better place for its disadvantaged YP. The aim here is to expose the core problems that its disadvantaged YP face and the implications of this in relation to youth work.

**Part 3** summarises the key points in relation to Part 1 and Part 2.





# PART 1: OXFORD: A DEEPLY UNEQUAL CITY

Oxford is an economically dynamic and rich city in Southeast England. The city attracts worldwide fame primarily due to the charming architecture of the University of Oxford, which dates to the 11th century. The city is well-known for its history and culture, including Christ Church Cathedral, various museums, nature reserves and several rivers that flow through it. Matthew Arnold, an English Victorian poet, infamously cast Oxford as 'that sweet city with her dreaming spires'.

Categorised as within the top 20% most densely populated local authority areas in England, Oxford's population stands at around 162,000.<sup>2</sup> The 2021 census revealed that 70.7% of Oxford's inhabitants are 'White', 15.4% are 'Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh', 5.6% identified with the 'Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups' category, 4.7% as 'Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African' and 3.7% as within 'other ethnic groups'.<sup>3</sup>

The city is the 'tourism gateway' for Oxfordshire County and attracts around 7 million visitors annually, bringing in around £780m for local businesses.<sup>4</sup> The University of Oxford is a key tourist attraction, with its economic impact on the UK economy estimated to stand at around £15.7bn, involving supporting over 28,000 full time (FT) jobs across the nation.<sup>5</sup> Whilst its economic contribution is evident, Oxford's universities including Oxford Brookes are also sources of local division and inequality, not least as both universities admit very few students from the city itself.<sup>6</sup>

Oxford scores well nationally on several measures. According to the Centre for Cities (2025),<sup>7</sup> the city ranks 1st in the UK for the highest percentage (74.3%) of the working age population with high-level qualifications (RQF4 or above), while it is also joint fifth for its low unemployment benefit claimant count (2.7%). Moreover, 67.3% of Oxford's employees work in 'Major Group 1-3' which includes Managers, Directors and Senior Officials, Professional Occupations and Associate Professional Occupations. This is significantly higher than the Southeast and UK at 56.9% and 53.4% respectively.<sup>8</sup>

Such a highly qualified workforce contributes to Oxford ranking 9th for average weekly workplace earnings; FT workers' gross weekly pay stands at £780.2 compared to the UK average of £729.8. The prevalence of well-paid work comes into sharp view when compared with 'left behind' towns and cities. For example, in the town of Middlesbrough in Northeast England, gross

<sup>2</sup> Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2023) *How life has changed in Oxford: Census 2021*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E07000178/>

<sup>3</sup> ONS (2023)

<sup>4</sup> Oxford City Council (n.d) *Economic Statistics*. Available at: <https://www.oxford.gov.uk/statistics-oxford/economic-statistics>

<sup>5</sup> London Economics (2021) *The economic impact of the University of Oxford: Final Report for the University of Oxford*. Available at: <https://www.ox.ac.uk/sites/files/oxford/Economic%20impact%20of%20the%20University%20of%20Oxford%202021.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Dorling, D (2024) *Shattered Nation: Inequality and the Geography of a Failing State*. London: Verso.

<sup>7</sup> Centre for Cities (2025) *Cities Outlook 2025*. Available at: <https://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Cities-Outlook-2025.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> NOMIS (2024) *Labour Market Profile – Oxford*. Available at: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157324/report.aspx?town=oxford>

weekly pay for a FT employee stands at £611.3<sup>9</sup> – £169 less per week than Oxford.

Despite Oxford’s economic dynamism, it is the UK’s 2nd most unequal city. In fact, Professor Danny Dorling previously stated that ‘if he was arranging a field trip to look at inequality in Western Europe, he would choose Oxford’.<sup>10</sup> The locality suffers from several key problems, especially housing affordability. Latest data available (November 2024) indicates that the average cost of buying a house in Oxford stands at £475,000,<sup>11</sup> making it one of the most expensive places to buy a home in the UK.

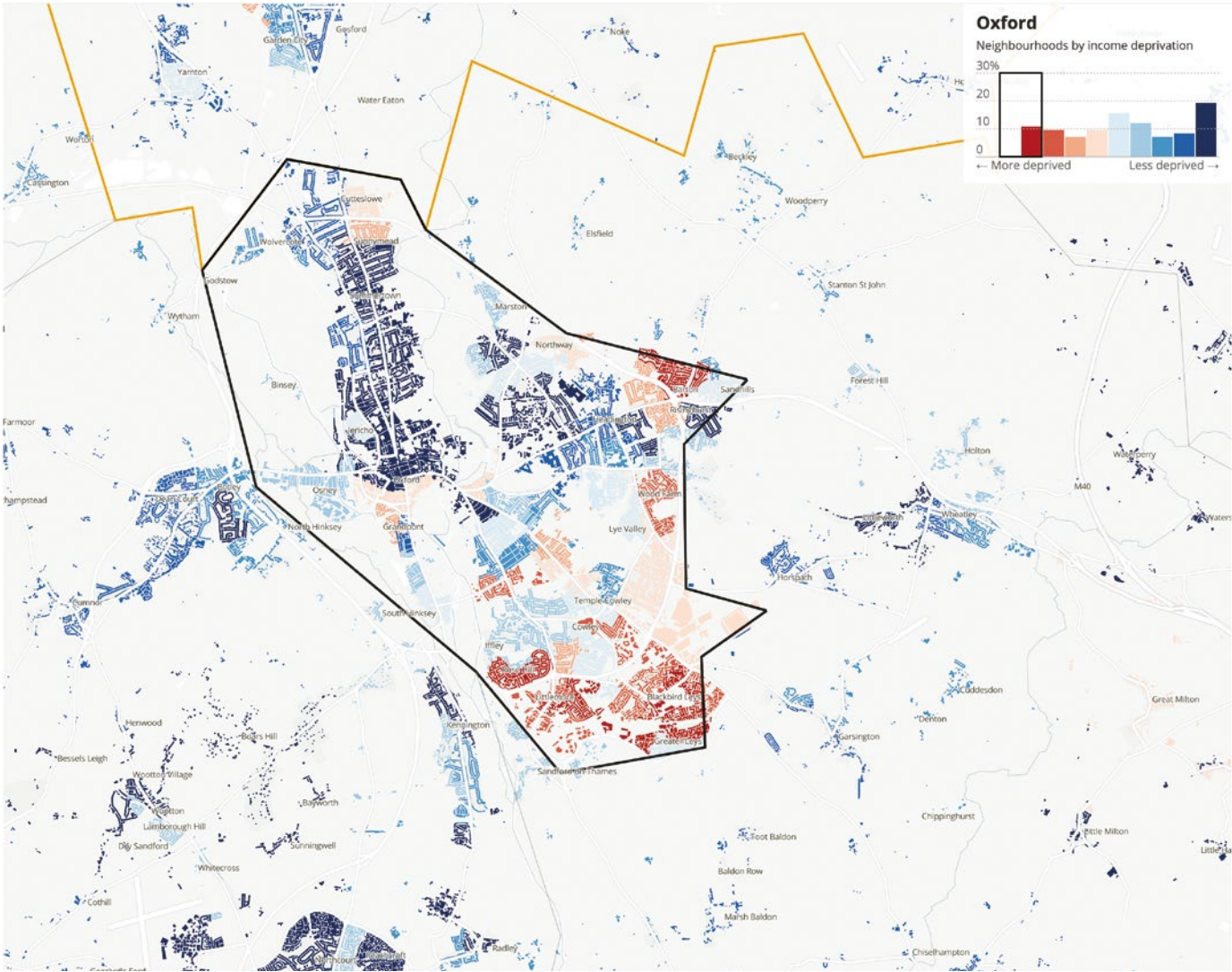
There is a lack of social housing in the city, with over 3,000 residents on a waiting list.<sup>12</sup> The lowest quality housing stock is generally quickly refurbished and rented out expensively particularly to university students. Private rents have been increasing for some time – in January 2025, the average monthly rent reached a record high of £1,798.<sup>13</sup> Around a third (32.2%) of Oxford’s households privately rent, contributing to the city possessing the Southeast’s lowest percentage of homeowners.<sup>14</sup>

High housing costs particularly impacts upon YP and low-income individuals in Oxford’s disadvantaged areas, as well as many professionals including university lecturers who increasingly cannot afford to live in the city.<sup>15</sup> This has contributed to a shortage of workers, including in the health and social care sector. For example, Professor Danny Dorling recently noted that the city’s John Radcliffe Hospital can never fill its vacant job roles as hospital workers’ wages are too low and housing costs are too high.

The city is home to 83 neighbourhoods – 9 are categorised as within England’s top 20% most income deprived.<sup>16</sup> The image below reveals the geographical spread of income deprivation in Oxford, with the least deprived neighbourhoods coloured dark blue and the most deprived coloured red. Whilst some places particularly in north Oxford are amongst the UK’s least deprived, apart from several locales to the east, the most deprived localities are in south Oxford.

In relation to the broader national picture of deprivation, these areas are relatively hidden pockets of decline not least as the general perception of Oxford is one of prosperity and affluence. There is also very little national political or policy focus on disadvantaged areas within affluent towns/cities. For Professor John Boswell and colleagues, these are places of ‘nested deprivation’ that are ‘never acknowledged’.<sup>17</sup> However, as alluded to in a 2023 Guardian article, the residents of Oxford’s disadvantaged areas often face significant social, cultural and economic challenges.<sup>18</sup> Although deprivation and affluence in the UK often sit close together, in Oxford this is particularly acute as disadvantaged areas are situated within ‘very close proximity to very affluent ones, resulting in dramatic contrasts in the life chances afforded to children now found street-by-street’.<sup>19</sup>

High levels of inequality shape localised problems. Emmaus Oxford – a homelessness charity – reported in February 2024 that homelessness had increased by 70% in comparison to the previous year.<sup>20</sup> Research has also revealed that, similarly to other cities’ homeless populations Oxford’s homeless



(Image 1: taken from ONS, 2021).

population die prematurely, often due to suicide or drug and alcohol dependencies.<sup>21</sup> Residents of Oxford’s most disadvantaged neighbourhoods also tend to die much younger than residents of its more affluent areas – 13.8 years and 11.2 years younger for men and women respectively.<sup>22</sup> The English Indices of Deprivation (2019) revealed that 3 of Oxford’s 83 neighbourhoods rank in the top 10% of England’s localities for high crime rates. It is important to note, however, that a large volume of crime goes unreported and does not filter into these official statistics.

Across 2022-23 28.4% of Oxford’s children were living in poverty; an increase of 1.1% compared

to across 2015-22.<sup>23</sup> Many of Oxford’s schools are part of Multi-Academy Trusts, and as we will see in Part 2, some schools particularly in the disadvantaged areas possess palpable problems in recruiting and retaining teachers leading to a reliance upon supply staff. As Professor Danny Dorling remarked, Oxford’s YP are growing up in a deeply divided and unequal city, with particularly family background and social class shaping their lived experiences of the education system:

9 NOMIS (2024) *Labour Market Profile – Middlesbrough*. Available at: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157060/printable.aspx>

10 Oxford City Council (2015) *Combatting Inequality: Is Oxford City Council doing all it can to make Oxford a fairer, more equal place?* Available at: <https://mycouncil.oxford.gov.uk/documents/s24680/Report%20of%20the%20Inequality%20Scrutiny%20Panel%20v2%20for%20CEB.pdf>

11 ONS (2025) *Housing prices in Oxford*. Available at: [https://cy.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/housingpriceslocal/E07000178/#house\\_price](https://cy.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/housingpriceslocal/E07000178/#house_price)

12 Oxford City Council (n.d) *Is social housing the best option for you?* Available at: <https://www.oxford.gov.uk/apply-social-housing/before-you-apply>

13 ONS (2025)

14 ONS (2023)

15 Dorling, D (2024)

16 ONS (2021) *Exploring local income deprivation*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/dvc1371/#/E07000178>

17 Boswell, J Denham, J Furlong, J Killick, A Ndugga, P Rek, B Ryan, M & Shipp, J (2022) Place-based Politics and Nested Deprivation in the U.K: Beyond Cities-towns, ‘Two Englands’ and the ‘Left Behind’. Representation. 58(2): 169-190.

18 Booth, R (2023) *High-end bikes and overcrowded homes: where poverty hides in Oxford*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/dec/11/high-end-bikes-and-overcrowded-homes-where-poverty-hides-in-oxford>

19 Brimblecombe, N Dorling, D & Green, M (2020) Who still dies young in a rich city? Revisiting the case of Oxford. The Geographical Journal. 186: 247-258.

20 Emmaus Oxford (2024) *Rough sleeping up 70% in Oxford*. Available at: <https://emmaus.org.uk/oxford/worrying-statistics-reveal-street-homelessness-up-by-70-in-oxford-says-charity/>

21 Brimblecombe, N Dorling, D & Green, M (2020)

22 Oxford City Council (n.d) *Thriving Communities Strategy*. Available at: <https://www.oxford.gov.uk/people-communities/thriving-communities-strategy/4>

23 End Child Poverty (2024) *Local Child Poverty Statistics 2024*. Available at: <https://endchildpoverty.org.uk/child-poverty-2024/>



“On education you can divide the children of the city of Oxford into ten cohorts of equal size from those sent to schools from which it is almost impossible to emerge without a string of A’s to those who will almost certainly not be going to any university. All this is predictable from home postcode and parental income. It is almost entirely unrelated to any inherent genetic endowment that each Oxford child may have. Very few children know others outside of their cohort. It would be hard to design a more segregated social system than this in such a small space.”<sup>24</sup>

An informal educational approach based upon enhancing YP’s skills, aspirations and development through activities in different settings such as sports, employment and skills support, mentoring and residential trips, youth work primarily engages with YP aged 10-19. As the Youth Endowment Fund outlined, it is an important national resource that is ‘driven by the desire and passion to help children’ with youth work seeking to build trust with YP through ‘relationship building’.<sup>25</sup>

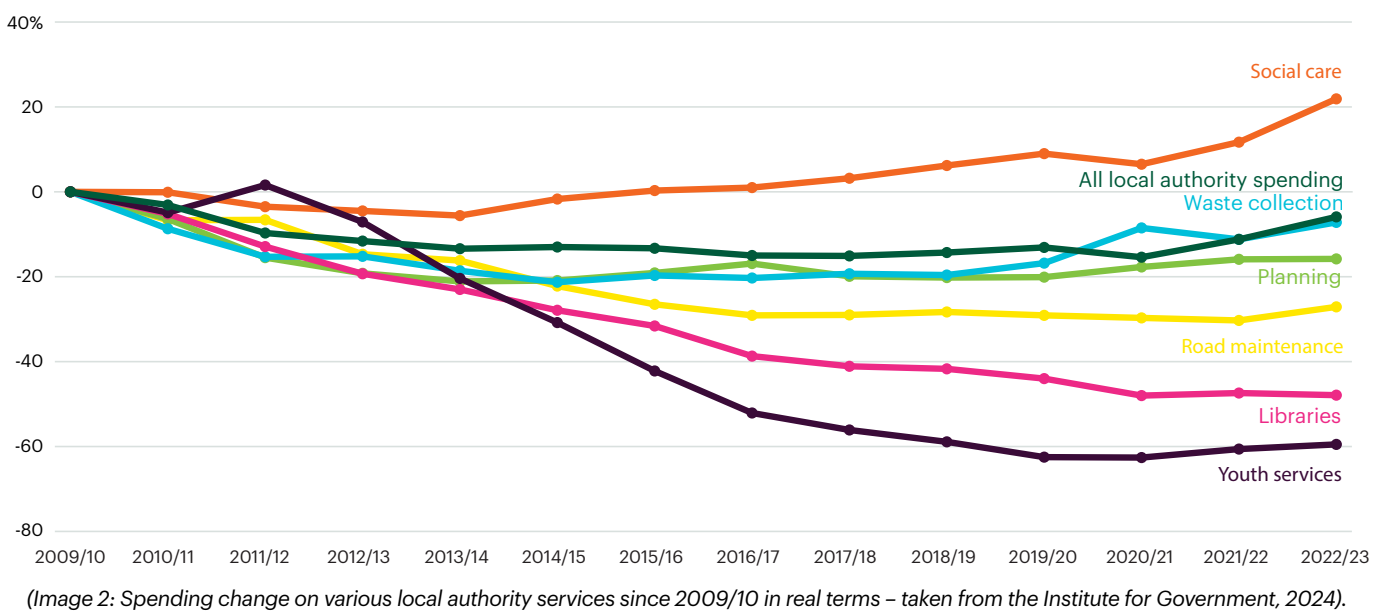
However, austerity measures negatively affected youth work including in the city. Oxford City Council lost around £7mn in central government funding across 2012-22, with the council having to save a further £5.5mn annually by 2026/27.<sup>26</sup> As Oxfordshire Youth recently highlighted, youth provision funding across England declined by over 50% in around a decade.<sup>27</sup> Across 2011-21, around 4,500 youth workers were lost, while

across 2011-12 to 2018-19 youth clubs supported by local authorities in England declined from an average of 14 to 8.

A recent BBC article outlined how youth workers in the broader area of Oxfordshire County suggested cuts to youth services would bring about ‘disastrous’ long-term impacts to many YP.<sup>28</sup> The article also highlighted how there has been a rise in self-harm and undiagnosed special educational needs amongst YP in Oxfordshire, resulting in many YP ‘losing hope’. As image 2 demonstrates, cuts to youth provision in the UK were considerable in comparison to various other services. However, from 2022, Oxfordshire County Council has made investments in preventing escalation of statutory engagement and adverse effects on the lives of YP aged 11-18 through its Targeted Youth Support Service.<sup>29</sup>

Crime is also an issue in Oxford’s disadvantaged localities. Across 2019/20 there were 144 knife enabled crimes in Oxford – however, this has continuously declined since then and reached a 5 year low at 89 knife enabled crimes in 2023/24.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, various ‘high-profile’ knife related crimes occurred last year, resulting in Oxford’s community leaders meeting to discuss the city’s strategy in addressing knife crime and emphasis was placed on addressing YP’s needs. Serious violence also reached a 5 year low recently, with 55 offences committed in 2023/24 compared to 59 in 2019/20. However, a knife crime reduction campaigner in Oxford, Jabu Nala-Hartley, recently claimed that the decline could be due to underreporting by YP who “don’t like dealing with the police.”<sup>31</sup>

24 Dorling, D (2018) *Inequality and Oxford*. The Oxford Magazine. 399: 3-4.  
25 Jackson, C (2024) *The Vital Role of Youth Work in Reducing Violence and Supporting Young People*. The Youth Endowment Fund. Available at: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/the-vital-role-of-youth-work-in-reducing-violence-and-supporting-young-people/>  
26 BBC (2022) *Oxford City Council facing ‘tough choices’ over budget cuts*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-61979932>  
27 Oxfordshire Youth (2024) *Government research reveals the bleak consequences of youth work funding cuts*. Available at: <https://oxfordshireyouth.org/2024/03/government-research-reveals-the-bleak-consequences-of-youth-work-funding-cuts/>  
28 BBC (2024) *Oxford youth workers criticise ‘disastrous’ funding cuts*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-oxfordshire-68292558#:~:text=A%20report%20by%20the%20YMCA,children%20were%20%22losing%20hope%22.>  
29 Oxfordshire County Council (n.d) *Oxfordshire Targeted Youth Support Service*. Oxfordshire County Council. Available at: <https://oxme.info/targeted-youth-support-service/oxfordshire-targeted-youth-support-service>  
30 Oxford City Council (2024) *Community leaders meet to discuss tackling knife crime in Oxford*. Available at: <https://www.oxford.gov.uk/news/article/1531/community-leaders-meet-to-discuss-tackling-knife-crime-in-oxford>  
31 Qurashi, N (2024) *Oxford knife crime at ‘lowest level’ but questions remain*. Oxford Mail. Available at: <https://www.oxfordmail.co.uk/news/24562892.oxford-knife-crime-lowest-level-questions-asked/>



The report’s next section – part 2 – explores the primary findings from the collaborative research project between the University of York and Oxford Youth Ambition and outlines the relevance of this to youth work.



## PART 2: FINDINGS FROM THE PRIMARY RESEARCH

### 2.1: Growing up in Oxford

When asked “what is it like to grow up here?”, the research participants particularly the YP were keen to firstly emphasise the positive aspects of growing up in the city. Although some immediately acknowledged the disadvantaged area’s problems, they counteracted this by suggesting they were “not as bad” as elsewhere particularly in the bigger cities such as Birmingham, London and Manchester. Respondent 1, online survey, aged 14-16, said: “It’s quite nice. Better than other places.” Similarly, Respondent 3, boy, Youth FG 3, noted how:

*“Compared to other places, we are not that bad. In somewhere like Brixton [South London] it is bad.”*

Respondent 1, girl, Youth FG 5, was studying away from the city at university. She described living in Oxford as:

*“At least the part I lived in, it was quite peaceful and calm, low key. Everyone was quite kind as well. It was kind of slow moving, a very nice ambience altogether.”*

Luke: “So you would describe it as a good place to live then?”

*“Depending on where you are living, it was better than some areas. But compared to certain areas of the UK, it can be considered a really nice place.”*

The sentiments above were typical of the respondents who described Oxford as a good place to live, although some areas in the city were regarded as a lot better to live in than others. However, Respondent 1, girl, Youth FG 2, suggested: “there’s a real sense of community” in Oxford’s disadvantaged localities. Participants claimed this meant people looked out for one another and were kind to others in more disadvantaged situations, which often involved giving donations to local food banks. This sentiment was reiterated by Respondent 3, female, Youth Workers FG 2:

*“In deprived communities, people take care of each other more, people know they might have each other’s back, supporting each other on the ground. We all see each other’s struggles.”*

Many participants emphasised the sense of relative community and togetherness in the city’s disadvantaged areas. Others acknowledged that there had been some recent investment in these locales, which created new opportunities for residents:

*“I think Place 1 is becoming a bit safer, they’ve got a new building, shopping centre, they are trying to improve the place.” [Respondent 1, Boy, Youth FG 3]*

When asked about the University of Oxford, a handful of YP offered positive remarks such as Respondent 3, girl, Youth FG 2: “It looks cool.” However, most YP regarded it as something distant and unrelated to their lives. They believed they would never be admitted to study at the



university, largely as they did not have the educational opportunities to do so. There was a feeling of defeatism in this regard; a tangible sense that university was not for people like them:

*"No, I don't feel connected to it – nobody really cares about Oxford University. Only people from other countries and other towns."* [Respondent 7, Boy, Youth FG 2]

Leonard: "Is there a divide between the University of Oxford and places around here?"

*"100%, they [Oxford University students] are like different people you know; they can't relate to you in any way. They all live and stay in the nicest areas. **Where the students stay is a different world.** The divide is crazy. I work at one of the colleges. I think they [students] think I'm dangerous."* [Respondent 8, Boy, Youth FG 3]

These sentiments speak to the deep-rooted inequalities in the city; what one youth worker referred to as: "Oxford's Historic Town and Gown Divide" [Workshop]. Another core divide was how many YP regarded the city centre as a place that was largely not for them. Although some occasionally visited it to go shopping, most did not. This was partially because it was often 2-4 miles away from their residence, which presented problems in accessing it. As such, some YP claimed there should be more buses available. However, they felt more comfortable at a shopping centre in the south of the city. The YP suggested it was a good place to "hang about", not least as it was deemed to be more affordable than Oxford's main shopping centre. This division was closely linked to the youth workers' sentiments:

*"There are many privileged and disadvantaged areas, but I don't think people outside of Oxford realise there are 'poor' areas."* [Youth Worker, Workshop]

Youth work can play a crucial role in helping to counteract this inequality and raising the aspirations of YP, helping them achieve their true potential and achieve upward social mobility. For university, this could involve support and guidance on the sorts of skills required; hosting sessions that involve university staff to offer information on applying to university, personal statements and student finance; and taking YP onto university campuses such as through outreach sessions or open days to obtain further information on what it is like to be a university student. Research has also found that it is important for YP to be introduced to a range of people from different occupations to broaden their horizons, involving further career support as it is often limited in many schools.<sup>32</sup> Respondent 2, female, Youth FG 2, offered related ideas:

*"To build aspirations with YP, I've worked here as a youth worker for 10 years, even if it is doing a podcast with them, magazine, it makes a difference. Multi-agency work to inspire YP in things that doesn't have to be academic. In youth clubs, we help them with their entrepreneurship, uplifting them and telling them it's a great idea. There was this creative festival lantern parade involving charities coming together and they made that big elephant outside, and they paraded it around the local area. And then you hear kids talking about arts and crafts, so it is creating space for growth and inspiration."*

## 2.2: Education

Dissatisfaction with the educational system, particularly secondary schools, was a key research finding. Most YP spoke negatively about their formal education. Whilst some mentioned that it provided an opportunity to socialise with friends, the discontent was revealed by Respondent 1, female, Youth Workers FG 2:

*"It is difficult in school if teachers are going all the time, especially if they can't afford to live in Oxford. Class sizes are a big thing – private schools might have 20 in a school. My daughter's school last week, they had 3 classes in a hall as they had no teachers, as a parent it isn't good enough....Private schools, they are places which separate people. But if we didn't have private schools, we would all be invested in ensuring that all schools do well. Communities are separated and torn apart."*

*"Most of our teachers at school are off, they have to get foreign teachers to come in and teach us, cause nobody wants to work at our school."* [Respondent 2, Girl, Youth FG 2]

In the city's disadvantaged areas, there was a feeling that many schools suffered from an inability to retain staff, as well as funding problems. This resulted in a lack of stability for pupils and impacted negatively on their educational development and attainment. On the other hand, there are around 50 private schools in Oxfordshire County including some of the most expensive in the UK that are situated in the city of Oxford.<sup>33</sup> This schooling experience generates what one youth worker referred to as: "Aspirations/opportunities – focussed on top 1%. Extracurricular activities – a given – rowing, tennis, hockey, rugby" [Workshop]. However, it is important to note that there are also inequalities across Oxford's state schools:

*"There is such a cultural divide in Oxford. I used to go to a different school and the standards are so different. At the other one, there was no funding, people would be wary of each other. But now there is a lot of funding, people don't even lock their bikes up. At the other school they would have been knicked."* [Respondent 2, Boy, Youth FG 3]

Unsurprisingly, problems can emerge when there is a lack of funding as crime can become normalised. This can result in a policing presence at school: "We have police at our school a lot" [Respondent 1, Boy, Youth FG 3]. Whilst this can be intimidating and worrying for other YP, it also alters what is supposed to be an enlightening experience to improve their knowledge and place in the world. However, this notion was distant from the YP's sentiments: "Our school academy, yeah, they made it like a prison. They lock all the classroom doors so you can't get out" [Respondent 7, Boy, Youth FG 2]. Most of the youth workers were highly critical of Oxford's secondary schools in its disadvantaged localities:

*"Schools are massive, and they have to take responsibility. Teachers around this part of Oxford are coming and going, the retention rate is bad. Schools are too harsh, they penalise YP for being 2 minutes late, when it could be that that young person has taken their younger sibling to school because their mum is working or they are a single parent. A lot of the disadvantaged young kids are young carers."* [Respondent 3, Female, Youth Workers FG 2]

Amongst the youth workers, there was a feeling that schools were not doing all they can to support disadvantaged YP. This often involved being too punitive, particularly when they may have various problems to contend with at home such as poverty, a lack of parental support and the need to help

<sup>32</sup> Chambers, N Percy, C & Rogers, M (2020) *Disconnected: Career aspirations and jobs in the UK*. Education and Employers. Available at: <https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Disconnected-Career-aspirations-and-jobs-in-the-UK-1.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> For example, 2025 tuition fees for a one-year GCSE programme at Oxford International College are £35,075. Associated boarding fees for the year are also £36,495.25. See: Oxford International College (2025) – *OIC Oxford Fees 2024-25*. Available at: <https://www.oxcoll.com/oxford/admissions/fees>

raise their sibling(s). This led many youth workers to suggest these YP lose their childhood much earlier than YP in Oxford’s affluent areas, since they must mature quickly due to increased responsibilities to “provide for their families” [Youth Worker, Workshop]. Similarly, Respondent 4, female, Youth Workers FG 1, indicated that:

*“It starts with the curriculum. Putting all YP in a box, sit them in a silent classroom and in front of a whiteboard. It is not how everybody learns. It is boring and not engaging. They don’t go into a classroom and engage in group discussions like this – they are seen and not heard. I don’t think barriers at home are being addressed. They go into secondary school, and it is like a big black hole being dropped in it – they have to crawl out of it. It is the survival of the fittest. Schools are so intent on getting the end results. Those that are disruptive are then excluded. Maybe they have missed the content because they are home carers. Some don’t have settees or chairs to sit on. We don’t take into account cultural boundaries and differences.”*

This often resulted in a hyper-competitive schooling environment, where those YP who engaged in disruptive behaviour were suspended or excluded rather than supported to address their issues. As the Institute for Public Policy Research recently revealed, the poorest pupils in receipt of free school meals are around 5 times more likely to be permanently excluded from school.<sup>34</sup> Children from disadvantaged backgrounds, those who have special educational needs and mental ill health are the most likely pupils to miss learning. This filtered into the youth workers’ remarks, who suggested the resources are not available to support disadvantaged YP in many schools today meaning they are often viewed “as a statistic rather than an individual” [Youth Worker, Workshop].

It is important to highlight that schools often face sizable problems including insufficient funding, high staff workloads, and an increasing number of pupils not attending school. Nonetheless, the National Youth Agency recently called for greater integration between schools and youth work to address many of the issues YP face.<sup>35</sup> This could involve the integration of youth work principles and ways of working into teacher training; youth work support in delivering extracurricular activities including linking schools with organisations they have partnerships with; and/or designating a room in school dedicated to youth work which can help improve attendance, engagement and satisfaction for pupils.

Since this study focussed on the opinions of both YP and youth workers, schools were not contacted. However, it would be intriguing to include them in a follow-up research study. Oxford City Council does, however, have a close relationship with secondary schools and takes part in a number of strategic alliances such as the Children and Young People’s Partnership, where the work is in line with an approach to tackling the inequity that the city’s underprivileged YP face.

### 2.3: Crime

The prevalence of crime in Oxford’s disadvantaged locales was another key finding. It was regarded as socially damaging, causing a great deal of harm to victims, families, communities and the city more broadly. There was also a belief that youth crime had been increasing in recent years, with crimes mentioned ranging from incredibly serious acts like violent knife crime to acquisitive crimes such as shoplifting. The latter was arguably normalised in some of Oxford’s disadvantaged neighbourhoods:

*“The other day I walked into Sainsburys, and people were running out with things. A lot of people walk into shops and take what they want. Some shops are told to just let them steal. I know somebody who likes to steal cream eggs.”*  
[Respondent 5, Girl, Youth FG 4]

Most YP asserted they would feel unsafe walking around on an evening in their neighbourhood, while some claimed their parents informed them not to go to certain parts due to fears over their safety. Respondent 5, girl, Youth FG 5, said: “I think a lot of areas at night aren’t super well lit. In some areas like Place 1, there can be quite a lot of crime and stuff, so I wouldn’t feel safe at night.” Many youth workers emphasised that it is poverty, problematic social networks, a lack of opportunities and diminishing funding for youth services that act as the backdrop to YP getting involved in crime:

*“I grew up in Place 2 and had friends who got offered money in County Lines. Fortunately, I had support from my close ones and local youth provisions to not fall down the same path. As we didn’t have a lot of money, my former friends were tempted and some went on to do it.”*  
[Youth Worker, Workshop]

The allure of money at a young age can be a powerful motivating factor for many YP, particularly when they are growing up in a household where it is scarce. The data, though, also reveals that a strong social support network and youth work provision can reduce the likelihood of YP getting involved in crime, acting as *protective barriers*. A recent report by The Institute for Government displayed that youth work can form a key preventative intervention for various problematic

behaviours, with studies consistently finding that regular engagement with youth clubs reduces the likelihood of involvement in both crime and anti-social behaviour.<sup>36</sup> Although YP’s engagement with youth clubs offering generic provision tends to dwindle when they are aged over 13 as they instead opt for activity specific clubs such as the gym, boxing, motorsport and music, for YP at risk of being involved in crime youth club engagement helps them to develop alternative social support groups, identities and offers them informal guidance that is focused on their needs and development. As the National Youth Agency outlined, ‘youth workers are well-placed to develop positive relationships that have the potential to lead to transformative change’.<sup>37</sup> This change is often long-lasting as it reduces the likelihood of those YP being in contact with the criminal justice system in the future.

Another youth worker, though, highlighted how Oxford’s high cost-of-living can potentially propel some YP into crime:

*“Many YP want to stay in their neighbourhoods but cannot afford to, jobs are difficult to come by and so YP are taking the easier options – County Lines has become rife in this area because there are many YP who want things but can’t get them due to lack of services, support and opportunities.”*  
[Youth Worker, Workshop]

As mentioned in Part 1, the cost of housing in Oxford is amongst the most expensive in the UK and there is also a lack of social housing. As such, there was a feeling that some YP could get involved in facilitating the supply of illegal drugs to make money. Facilitating illegal drug sales was regarded by some YP as: “easy money, so easy. It is normalized kind of thing” [Respondent 4, Boy, Youth FG 3]. Knife crime was also mentioned by respondents

34 Gill, K Brown, S O’Brien, C Graham, J & Poku-Amanfo, E (2024) *Who is Losing Learning? The Case for Reducing Exclusions Across Mainstream Schools*. Available at: [https://ippr-org.files.svdcn.com/production/Downloads/Who\\_is\\_losing\\_learning\\_Sept24\\_2024-09-06-103617\\_euht.pdf](https://ippr-org.files.svdcn.com/production/Downloads/Who_is_losing_learning_Sept24_2024-09-06-103617_euht.pdf)

35 National Youth Agency (2024) *Better together: Youth work with schools*. Available at: [https://nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/NYA\\_Publications-2023\\_Youth-Work-With-Schools\\_pdf\\_for\\_upload\\_REV-1-1.pdf](https://nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/NYA_Publications-2023_Youth-Work-With-Schools_pdf_for_upload_REV-1-1.pdf)

36 The Institute for Government (2024)

37 National Youth Agency (2023) *The social costs of youth work cuts*. Available at: <https://nya.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/NYA-Report-The-social-cost-of-youth-work-cuts-E28093-Preventing-youth-offending-through-youth-work.pdf>



in all FGs and the workshop. However, many YP were again keen to emphasise that the problem in Oxford is not as acute as elsewhere, suggesting: “it could be worse” [Respondent 1, Boy, Youth FG 3]. However, for those that lived close to where crime including knife crime occurred, it often had a long-lasting and negative impact: “Somebody was stabbed in a park where I used to live. There has been a lot of people breaking in. I then had a nightmare that somebody was breaking into my house” [Respondent 3, Girl, Youth FG 4]. Other participants believed that:

*“The city is riddled with gang culture and drugs.” [Aged 17-19, Survey]*

*“Knife crime is a problem, people thinking they are like ‘Gs’. Some people carry knives, but they don’t use them.”*  
[Respondent 5, Boy, Youth FG 2]

Leonard: “Why do people carry knives in Oxford?”

*“If people have beef or whatever. If he has a knife, I will carry one for protection. It is like a cycle.”*  
[Respondent 5, Boy, Youth FG 3]

*“Gang violence.”*  
[Respondent 1, Boy, Youth FG 3]

Whilst YP (largely boys/males) are disproportionately impacted by knife crime, they carry and utilise knives for a variety of reasons. Research revealed that many youth knife crime perpetrators and victims are from disadvantaged backgrounds and have been exposed to adverse

childhood experiences including violence, parental separation and loss, substance use in the family, as well as abuse.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, they often carry knives out of feelings of fear and the need to protect themselves; a form of ‘harm prevention and being streetwise’ where ‘to not carry a knife is deemed irresponsible’.<sup>39</sup> The need to look beyond the crime and at the YP’s upbringings was also cast as vitally important:

*“People look at crime and then they leave it at that. Nobody looks at what has gone wrong – what is wrong with this young person? Did they have to do it because they got paid for it? Nobody looks at the root cause. They get labelled, into the criminal justice system, probably never get a job. Nobody cares for them. Why do year 9 boys feel so unsafe they have to carry a knife?”*  
[Youth Worker, Female, FG 2]

The Institute for Fiscal Studies reported last year that austerity and the closure of youth clubs generated an increase in youth offending; the YP aged 10-17 who had lost their youth club were around 14% more likely to commit crime in the six years after it closed than those who had not.<sup>40</sup> For every £1 saved through the closure of these youth clubs, the social costs are estimated to be around £3. It is important to note that youth work is uniquely placed to prevent YP from committing crime and helping them desist. The Youth Endowment Fund (2024) indicated that, compared to other professionals, youth workers have different relationships with YP that pivots upon trust and respect. Vulnerable YP, including those affected by violence, are also the most likely to attend youth clubs which provides unique grounds for interventions.<sup>41</sup>

38 Gray, P Smithson, H & Jump, D (2021) *Serious youth violence and its relationship with adverse childhood experiences*. Available at: <https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprobation/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2021/11/Academic-Insights-Gray-et-al.pdf>

39 Gray, P Smithson, H & Jump, D (2021)

40 Villa, C (2024) *The effects of youth clubs on education and crime*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at: [https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-11/WP202451-The-effects-of-youth-clubs-on-education-and-crime\\_1.pdf](https://ifs.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-11/WP202451-The-effects-of-youth-clubs-on-education-and-crime_1.pdf)

41 Youth Endowment Fund (2024) *Children, violence and vulnerability 2024 report 5: Who has access to positive activities, youth clubs and trusted adults?* Available at: [https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/CVV24\\_R5\\_Activities-1.pdf](https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/CVV24_R5_Activities-1.pdf)

## 2.4: Housing

Oxford’s highly expensive housing market was a concern voiced by many participants. Although for some YP: “housing feels like a distant priority – for a lot of YP the immediate priority is going to school, accessing food, getting them to youth clubs” [Respondent 4, Female, Youth Workers FG 2], particularly the older aged YP seemed to be aware that buying a house/renting in the city was going to be unaffordable. There was a sense that this could negatively affect their aspirations, since: “even if they wanted to get a job and become independent, Oxford is unaffordable” [Youth Worker, Workshop]. Similarly:

*“YP growing up in disadvantaged areas of Oxford understand that Oxford is expensive and their families struggle.”*  
[Youth Worker, Workshop]

*“There isn’t enough housing, very expensive.”*  
[Respondent 4, Boy, Youth FG 2]

This means some families have no choice but to move out of Oxford to more affordable localities:

*“I think for some families they are having to move further away. If they have their own families to support them looking after their grandchildren or for support, then it is bad. There isn’t as much social housing, the rents are through the roof. All the YP are applying for the same jobs, there just isn’t the work out there. 1 bedroom flat in Oxford minimum is £700 a month, if a young person is earning around £1,200 a month that is a huge amount to pay on rent. It is a struggle.”*  
[Respondent 1, Male, Youth Workers FG 2]

Given the above, the ability of many residents especially YP to then save for a deposit to buy a home is significantly reduced:

*“I currently rent, I’m 26, it is expensive. Around 2 grand a month. It is a house, 3 bed. I am on a council list; it will take years. It is impossible, unless you have certain needs and circumstances. People are literally fighting to buy and rent”*  
[Respondent 8, Male, Youth Workers FG 1]

The city’s housing crisis is long running and entrenched; there are no easy answers or quick fixes. Alongside high housing costs, some housing stock is also of poor quality which impacts negatively upon the YP residing there:

*“A lot of the YP are living in homes that are in really poor condition, but they can’t afford to live in the better homes. They are poorly built, damp, that has a massive impact on their health. It is just what the YP are used to, what they think is normal”*  
[Respondent 6, Female, Youth Workers FG 2]

Similarly, Respondent 3, female, Youth Workers FG 2, described how:

*“I had one young person for a gross looking room paying £900 – he earns £1000 a month so lives off Biscoff. We [youth organisation] have told him about food banks, but he doesn’t want to. We do hot food as part of our session, and he has portion after portion. He is thinking about going into the army. I’m like if that is the way forward for you then so be it. His room is not nice, but he is very proud.”*

Many YP on low incomes often refrain from using a food bank due to feelings of shame. However, they suffer from 'hunger pains', manifesting in the young person above eating several portions of hot food at a session ran by a local youth organisation. Whilst some YP in the city, particularly to the south, struggle to afford to feed themselves, other YP living in affluent neighbourhoods in close proximity are living rather different lives:

*"You've got the canal quarter, North Oxford, they are like £1.5 million, aren't they? I don't know what can be done about it, to be honest. There are new developments. 20% has to be social housing and/or shared ownership. They might be in areas where not everybody might want to live in."*

**[Respondent 1, Female, Youth Workers FG 1]**

Interestingly, in Youth FG 3, when asked "if you had an option to live in any area in Oxford, where would it be?" the YP pinpointed Oxford's affluent locales:

*"Boars Hill, Summertown, Jericho."*

**[Multiple Respondents, Boys]**

*"Yeah, the houses there are like massive. Larger properties – it is near town. Oxford Uni is there. More funding goes into these places."*

**[Respondent 2, Boy]**

*"I'd live in Summertown. It has more money, more stuff, nicer place to live."*

**[Respondent 1, Boy]**

*"Oxford is one of the most expensive places to live. A house is like £400,000. In other places you could get two houses for that. I think problems are like areal – if you went to London things would be even more expensive there."*

**[Respondent 2, Boy]**

There are efforts underway to ease Oxford's housing market's predicaments including by Oxford City Council such as building more houses. However, as the research findings indicate, many residents are struggling financially due to high housing costs with some claiming the issue will be extremely difficult to address.

## 2.5: Youth work

As mentioned, youth work has an important role to play in helping to address the issues YP face within Oxford's disadvantaged areas. Many YP in the FGs keenly emphasised the value of youth work particularly Oxford Youth Ambition, suggesting their youth clubs which covered ages 11-19 were beneficial and enjoyable. This had a positive impact on their life, offering a means to socialise with other YP and engage in activities that aided their personal development and skills encompassing teamwork, communication, problem-solving, creativity and confidence. Respondent 1, girl, Youth FG 1, stated: "I think there are fun places to go like this youth club" and that the activities are:

*"fun, free, and nice. There are free trips. In the summer, for example, we went to one and it had a lot of free stuff. We went kayaking, trampoline park, swimming. It was very fun."*

The YP also felt supported by their youth workers and claimed they were generally relatable and helpful. In Youth FG 1, Leonard asked: "what would be your ideal youth worker?" and some of the YP replied:

*"They have to be like us, young, understand what we are seeing and saying. Have to be like us."*

**[Respondent 9, Boy]**

*"To encourage you."*

**[Respondent 4, Boy]**

However, the youth workers identified how the sector had endured stringent funding cuts across the last decade or so. Insufficient levels of funding and staffing resulted in a lack of resource, with youth organisations compelled to compete against one another for short-term pots of funding. Rather than being able to focus on tangible improvements to YP's lives over a longer period, they argued the current environment resulted in short-termism and *organisational survival mode*. Respondent 1, male, Youth Workers FG 2, said:

*"Funding is huge. If you want to solve problems, you have to spend money. That is the end of it. You have to go to the right people as well.... Those people on the ground who have got the relationships with the communities – for example, we have been part of Place 3 for 13 years. It isn't me saying this is what I think you need – it is more based on the everyday day to day of what people need support with. We tell schools that they need support with mental health and wellbeing for YP. But the amount of time it takes to get funding, the information they need, it is spinning plates all the time. Grass roots organisations have great relationships with local communities and families; a much more trusting relationship than say when County Council, a big organisation, come in, and people can be unsure on engaging with them. Sometimes the money doesn't go to the right places. Every penny for charities who are non-profit goes to services and schools and families."*

The ongoing lack of funding means many youth workers are continually tasked with doing more and more with less resources, resulting in some YP not receiving the level of support that they need. Such an environment can increase stress and worry: "Many of these places are topping up their funding for 27/28, it's like, mate, we need funding for April" [Respondent 3, Female, Youth Workers FG 1]. The administrative resource and time required to lodge funding applications is also considerable and takes youth workers away from the fundamentals of youth work. This issue is now long-running:

*"Decades ago, we had Sure Start and it all got stripped back. And now we are here. We need lots more people. But there isn't the youth services and clubs. I work in the charity sector, and we have to fight blood, sweat and tears for funding. We are told we don't need the service."*

**[Respondent 3, Female, Youth Workers FG 1]**

Short-term efficiency savings in the form of diminished youth provision stores up problems for the future, impacting detrimentally on disadvantaged YP. Respondent 1, male, Youth Workers FG 2, put it bluntly when he said: "I've been working with YP and families in Oxford for over 26 years. Preventative services are gone." For some respondents, this has resulted in the erosion of a skilled workforce:

*"What is lacking are resources, staffing and the right staff. Skilled youth workers. We have a lack of youth workers. Investment in it as a trade, industry, profession. It is important as we know it has a positive impact."* **[Respondent 2, Female, Youth Workers FG 1]**

A Governmental review in February 2024 on youth provision and life outcomes found 'convincing evidence to show that youth activities have beneficial impacts for young people across a range of personal, social, educational, and



economic outcomes’,<sup>42</sup> with some forms of activity including mentoring, peer mentoring and summer employment schemes possessing the strongest evidence base regarding their positive impact on YP. Accordingly, it is difficult to downplay both the importance of youth work to the lives of disadvantaged YP and the urgent need for increased resourcing.

## 2.6: What Oxford needs to be a better place for its disadvantaged YP

Alongside highlighting the need to remedy the problems documented above, the YP also offered various ideas on what could be improved in their areas rather quickly. When specifically asked questions such as “what does Oxford need in order to be a better place?” and “if you had a magic wand, what would you change about Oxford”? – there were a range of answers. Many of these ideas were related to youth provision and included more:

- Basketball courts.
- Places to hang out.
- Life councillors.
- Parks.
- Opportunities.
- Youth clubs.
- Mental health support.
- Sporting activities.
- Football pitches.
- Street lighting.
- Investment.
- Apprenticeships.
- Skills development including for cooking, business, leadership, communication and confidence building.

The YP also mentioned that it would be great if:

- Oxford was a less expensive city to live in.
- School staff were better.
- There was less crime.
- And teaching assistants were paid more.

Most of the YP were very keen for more youth activities to occur in their areas:

*“Youth clubs and events nearby. They don’t have to be permanent, but fun things to go to throughout the year.”*

**[Respondent 5, Girl, Youth FG 5]**

*“We need more funding. It would be good to get funding for leisure things, for sports kits, transport, opportunities to go and play sports. If you don’t have these things, people get stuck in a cycle.”*

**[Respondent 2, Boy, Youth FG 3]**

There was a sense that regular events were important in keeping YP engaged with youth services and widening their horizons. These activities were also deemed important in reducing the likelihood of YP getting involved in crime, anti-social behaviour and other problematic behaviours such as spending an excessive amount of time on digital devices, which can impact negatively on YP’s mental and physical wellbeing. Moreover, youth activities were perceived as providing wholesome opportunities to socialise and develop identities, providing further means for social inclusion and a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, some YP currently felt as if certain forms of youth provision were lacklustre:

*“Say if YP want to play basketball, for instance, there’s barely anywhere to play it.”*

**[Respondent 4, Boy, Youth FG 2]**

Respondent 8, boy, Youth FG 3, contrasted this with facilities in Oxford’s affluent areas:

*“Look at the courts we’ve got here for basketball compared to some of them areas [North Oxford]. Summertown’s facilities are unbelievable. You can go there any time of the day and people will be playing.”*

Many youth workers also called for a more rounded approach to improving the lives of Oxford’s disadvantaged YP, pinpointing the need for various institutions to play a role:

*“Churches, the community centre and other intergenerational spaces are hugely important. It is important to create space where those who don’t have good older role models are able to join in with community and engage in the wider lives of other people.”*

**[Youth Worker, Male, Workshop]**

Considering the above, there was a perceived increased need for relatable role models that can help to offer further guidance and inspiration to YP. Provided with sufficient resourcing, youth work is again well placed to deliver this support.

<sup>42</sup> Gov UK (2024) Youth provision and life outcomes: Systematic literature review. Available at: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65ce4180e1bdec0011322215/Literature\\_Review\\_-\\_Report\\_-\\_Youth\\_Evidence\\_Base-accessible.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65ce4180e1bdec0011322215/Literature_Review_-_Report_-_Youth_Evidence_Base-accessible.pdf)

# PART 3: THE KEY POINTS

## 3.1: Part 1:

- Oxford is an economically dynamic and rich city, containing the most well-educated workforce in the UK. This contributes to relatively high average wages in Oxford.
- However, Oxford is also one of the UK's most unequal cities.
- This means it has palpable social problems. The cost of privately renting is currently at an all-time high; its local economy suffers from a shortage of workers in certain sectors such as health and social care; and 9 of its neighbourhoods are within the top 20% most income deprived in England.
- As a relatively small city, Oxford possesses deprivation and affluence in very close proximity including street-by-street.
- Over a quarter of its children live in poverty. And in relation to Oxford's YP's educational experiences, they are highly segregated.
- Like most places in the UK, Oxford has been impacted negatively by austerity over the last decade or so.
- Forms of crime are prevalent in the city's disadvantaged localities, including knife crime and violence.

## 3.2: Part 2:

- The research participants suggested there were various positives to living in Oxford, acknowledging that other places especially larger cities possess a greater share of social, economic and cultural problems.
- However, stark inequality shaped particularly the YP's experiences of the city, suggesting the universities and, by and large, the city centre is not for people like them.
- Experiences and views of secondary schools were negative. Schools were perceived as defined by a high turnover of staff, a police presence and a lack of resourcing and support.
- Forms of crime were normalized in some of Oxford's disadvantaged areas, involving the ever-present risk of many YP being drawn into illegal drug markets.
- Knife crime and gangs were also perceived to be a problem.
- Many YP were acutely aware that housing in Oxford is very expensive, meaning it seemed unlikely they would be able to afford to buy their own house in the city in the future.
- The high cost of privately renting, combined with low incomes, meant some YP had very little disposable income which impacted negatively on their wellbeing.
- Whilst youth work already plays an important role in helping to address some of these problems that its disadvantaged YP face, there is scope for it to play a much broader role.
- However, there was an impression that youth work is in a highly vulnerable and challenging position, mostly due to significant funding cuts, particularly among the Voluntary and Community Sector youth workers.
- A lack of resourcing and staffing inevitably meant short-termism was the norm.
- The YP offered a range of ideas to improve their areas and livelihoods in Oxford, with youth work ideally placed to particularly offer more sporting activities, life counselling and skills development. Of course, more funding and resourcing is essential to be able to achieve this.



# APPENDIX 1: ETHNICITIES OF THE FG YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

## Youth FG 1 (10 participants)

- Asian – East Timorese (2 YP)
- Black – African (Nigerian) (2 YP)
- Mixed – Black Caribbean/White British
- Black – African (Tanzanian)
- Asian – Indian
- White – Albanian
- Black – African (Sudanese)
- White – Polish

## Youth FG 2 (11 participants)

- White – British (4 YP)
- White and Black African (2 YP)
- White and Black Caribbean
- White – Irish
- Not disclosed on contact details (3 YP)

## Youth FG 3 (13 participants)

- Mixed – Black/White British (4 YP)
- Black – Caribbean (4 YP)
- Black – African (3 YP)
- White (2 YP)

## Youth FG 4 (6 participants)

- White – Irish (2 YP)
- White – English (2 YP)
- White – Russian
- Asian – East Timorese

## Youth FG 5 (6 participants)

- Mixed – White/Caribbean (3 YP)
- Mixed – White/African
- African
- Asian

