

## **Submerged: surfacing deep poverty during permacrisis**

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### **Abstract**

This paper surfaces the ‘hidden injuries’ of deepening privation that are often occluded through prevailing modes of poverty analysis. We do so by drawing on qualitative longitudinal, ethnographic research to examine what bearing permacrisis has had on the everyday survival strategies, sociality and health of those on the lowest incomes in the UK. Focusing on the experiences retained and recovered through a more inclusive sampling, recruitment and retention strategy, we evidence distinctive features of *deep* poverty and demonstrate how those worst affected by the ‘slow violence’ of necropolitical governance and class restructuring are also those most likely to fall outwith the sociological gaze and research process. Attending to the empirical problem and theoretical potential of absence in poverty research, we reflect on the corpus of experience we tend to centre in sociological analysis and the corpus of experience that is often left behind in the process.

**Keywords:** absence; hidden injuries; necropolitics; permacrisis; poverty; slow violence

### **Introduction**

The governance of successive economic shocks, stalling living standards, regressive welfare state recalibration and COVID-19 have all depleted the resources and support networks available to low-income communities across high-income countries (Desmond, 2023, Gaisbauer et al., 2019). Rather than a set of isolated incidents, these interlocking crises have engendered a sustained period of insecurity and instability – a permacrisis – particularly for those most vulnerable to socioeconomic restructuring (Williams, 2021, Vanhercke et al., 2023).

Whilst there is widespread evidence of the scarring effects these developments have had on people and places over time, there is also growing concern that particular forms of material dispossession are not fully accounted for in sociological analysis, government reporting and the wider public imaginary across Europe and North America (Edin and Shaefer, 2015, Gaisbauer et al., 2019, Hughes and Tarrant, 2023). For example, recent research on data gaps in the UK context has raised questions about ‘who and what is missing’ in poverty research, particularly when it comes to ‘its neglected extremes’ given the tendency to underrepresent particular groups by virtue of their tenure, household composition, ethnicity, migration status and health (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2023: 21; Edmiston, 2024). In response, this paper has three key aims. First, to evidence the substantive experiences and trajectories of those *worst* affected by permacrisis in the UK context by drawing on qualitative longitudinal, ethnographic research. Second, to consider the extent to which prevailing methodological approaches render deepening poverty visible, by focusing on those often poorly accounted for or represented in existing research. Third, to reflect on the various ways in which this tendency delimits ways of knowing, seeing and responding to the extremes of disadvantage in highly unequal times.

Focusing on the lived experiences retained and recovered through a more inclusive sampling, recruitment and retention strategy, we surface the ‘hidden injuries’ (Paton, 2016, Sennett and Cobb, 2023) of deepening poverty that are often occluded from and through poverty analysis. Adopting a critical realist commitment to ‘uncovering “hidden” dimensions of social reality’ we explore the ‘necessary tendencies’ that shape the prevalence, experience and visibility of deepening poverty (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 10). Informed by postcolonial perspectives, we evidence how the ‘slow violence’ of permacrisis is lived, felt and negotiated by its ‘gradual casualties’ (Nixon, 2011: 41), and the ‘constellations of factors’ associated with ‘deep social exclusion’ that tend to mediate the scope for and significance of individual agency across divergent circumstance and context (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2013: 150). In doing so, we focus on the ‘normative character of everyday experience’ and the moral boundary drawing central to necropolitical governance and class restructuring over time (Mbembe, 2003: 39; Sayer, 2005: 949).

Our findings evidence how *deep* poverty – a relative condition experienced and defined in reference to a higher material standard of privation – is not only more precarious, but also differs in several important ways from the more general challenges of living on a low income. Our analysis demonstrates how and why the methodological frameworks adopted across the social sciences mean those worst affected by permacrisis are also those most likely to fall outwith the research process, resulting in an inherently conservative reading of deep poverty dynamics and effects. We conclude by reflecting on the distinctive features of *deep* poverty and what theoretical lessons such differences offer for postcolonial studies and poverty analysis respectively.

### **Surfacing the ‘slow violence’ of permacrisis**

Over the last two decades, the UK government has presided over a period of profound socio-political and economic rupture. Seizing and staging crises, political leaders have narrated a story of collective struggle and sacrifice whilst those with the least bear the brunt of permacrisis, comprising successive socio-material shocks, welfare austerity, environmental degradation and public health threats (Edmiston, 2020). Far from linear, Williams (2021) argues the sequencing of these ‘events’ reflects broader crises of capital, care, transnational mobility and climate change that ‘collide’ to undermine the ontological security afforded to welfare citizens and subjects over time. The governance of these ‘colliding crises’ has gradually pushed the parameters and logics of disposability, whereby some bodies and livelihoods have been deemed expendable for the sake and interests of others (Williams, 2021: 51-53).

Mayblin *et al.* (2020) demonstrates how this enactment of necropolitics plays out in the everyday experience of asylum seekers in the UK, with *intentional* conditions of destitution imposed upon people to set the terms upon which life can, and cannot, be lived. Similar logics of social and material dispossession have been inflicted on the unemployed, disabled people, single parents, larger families, social tenants as well as those with No Recourse to Public Funds over the last 15 years in the UK (Cooper and Whyte, 2017). Particularly since 2010, hyper-marginal groups have been subjected to welfare disciplining through reduced coverage and entitlement to working-age social security and local welfare assistance, an enhanced system of benefit deductions and increased conditionality for sickness and disability-related support (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2023: 6). Such measures have sought to ‘improve work incentives’ by making life harder for those ‘on welfare’ (Pemberton *et al.*, 2017, Mills and Pring, 2023).

Central to this project, has been the classification and regulation of human worth with the ‘discipline of life and the necessities of hardship’ wielded against people as deemed strategically or politically necessary (Mbembe, 2003: 39). Such ‘logics of unequal humanity’ are often examined within postcolonial studies along ethno-religious lines to demonstrate how regimes operate according to ‘historically embedded colonial/modern, racially hierarchical worldviews’ (Mayblin et al., 2020: 108). However, in this paper we demonstrate how the necropolitics of state sovereignty and (in)action, that determine whose lives are made and unmade possible, extends to a broader constituency of classed subjects within and across national borders. Sayer (2005: 948) argues the hierarchies of moral standing assigned to (and assumed by) classed subjects are intimately bound up with the substantive ‘possibility of achieving valued ways of life that bring recognition and self-respect’. Postcolonial perspectives then have wider analytical purchase that can enrich poverty studies, particularly our understanding of deepening privation and the classed nature of necropolitical governance. Over time, the governance of permacrisis and the costs borne by its ‘gradual casualties’ (Nixon, 2011: 41), have come to reflect and reinforce an unequal distribution of moral recognition and human worth available to citizens and subjects. The cumulative effects of this are partly reflected in rising hunger and destitution (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2023). However, we also see it quietly reflected in the slow attrition of health and well-being, with life expectancy falling in the most deprived areas of the UK over this period (Walsh and McCartney, 2023). Whilst not always recognised as such, these developments constitute a form of ‘slow violence’, meted out by the state against those struggling for social recognition and institutional support (Nixon, 2011, Cooper and Whyte, 2017, Mayblin et al., 2020). In this paper though, we argue that the full extent of this systemic violence inflicted during permacrisis is often poorly reflected through prevailing approaches to poverty analysis.

In terms of quantitative analysis, current data practices and infrastructure considerably underestimate deepening privation for two reasons. First, because aggregated headcount measures typically employed do not account for increasing inequality below the poverty line (Edmiston, 2022). Second, the non-private-household population (NPH) are missing from the main household income surveys underpinning government reporting of low incomes and policy evaluation in the UK (Edmiston, 2024). This matters because the NPH is at much greater risk of poverty: at least a quarter of the estimated 3.8 million people experiencing destitution in the UK are part of the NPH; living in temporary accommodation, hostels, refuges, B&Bs, shelters, sleeping rough or staying with family and friends (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023: 35).

This paper focuses principally though on the methodological choices typically made in qualitative poverty research that result in the ‘discursive and evidentiary absencing’ of particular people and their experiences (Hughes and Tarrant, 2023: 209). In great part, the deepening of poverty itself makes the social injuries of permacrisis much harder to surface. As this paper will demonstrate, when people fall deeper into poverty, their contact with local services and presence within shared civic space diminishes or becomes increasingly provisional. Despite this, qualitative research routinely assesses the changing nature of poverty via sampling and recruitment criteria that either foreground or exclusively capture the experiences of those in touch with the social security system, accessing charitable aid or support services, who speak English, or who self-identify as ‘living on a low income’ (e.g. Patrick et al., 2023). Participants are often signposted via key informants and gatekeeper organisations, whilst those excluded from services and support altogether fall outside the sampling frame (Pemberton et al., 2017).

The experiences of those conventionally sampled are often recorded, held up and reproduced as indicative of the costs and consequences of permacrisis, shaping academic and applied understanding of poverty. However, the circulation of these experiences and their wider treatment runs several risks if the accounts in circulation do not always sufficiently acknowledge or account for differences between those experiencing shallower and deeper forms of poverty. When the former is centred and circulated as capturing ‘the lived realities of poverty’ (Pemberton et al., 2017: 1157), it occludes the latter along with some of the worst consequences of permacrisis in the wider public imaginary. For example, Pemberton et al., (2017: 1158-60) interview ‘people living on a low income’ that are accessing support ‘through community and voluntary organisations’ and draw broader conclusions about the effects of ‘deepening impoverishment’. Whilst attempts are made to capture a ‘variety of perspectives according to age, gender and ethnicity’, it is less clear whether or how Pemberton et al., (2017: 1160) have accounted for sampling those only currently in touch with local services. People experiencing severe and multiple disadvantage often struggle to access support services, avoid contact with charitable or statutory organisations or ‘go to extreme lengths to conceal or downplay the severity of their circumstance’ (Johnsen and Blenkinsopp, 2024: 92). A tendency to ‘focus exclusively on the most visible manifestations’ of disadvantage then means experiences of severe and multiple disadvantage are less ‘obviously and/or immediately visible’ to researchers, practitioners and policymakers (Johnsen and Blenkinsopp, 2024: vii-ix).

Jolly et al. (2022: 108) argue that the repeated exclusion and under-representation of those struggling most for institutional recognition and support from the sampling frame in social research has led to a ‘significant gap in both our understanding of the landscape of poverty in the UK’, and the way in which policies ‘can cause extreme poverty’ specifically. Similarly, Pinter (2024: 98) argues that ‘significant data gaps’ undermine our understanding of both the prevalence and causes of hyper-marginality amongst children, ethnic minorities and migrants because key population subgroups are ‘often missing in mainstream child poverty research’. Where research has focused on those experiencing hyper-marginality, this has tended to exoticise poverty, ‘othering’ those affected, and pathologising behaviours and social outcomes (Crossley, 2017). In response, there is growing recognition of the need to improve ‘representation of higher risk populations as well as proper representation of excluded non-household and non-responding populations’ in poverty research (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2023: 20). In general, poverty research tends to be much better at capturing those who continue struggling financially or who move away from the cliff edge – they tend to be much less effective at capturing the experience of those who fall off the cliff edge entirely (Gaisbauer et al., 2019). As a result, much less consideration has been given to the hidden (often intimate) forms of privation that are not shared, not told, and not seen as a result.

In response, this paper seeks to answer two questions. First, what experiences of deepening privation are typically missed through conventional approaches to poverty analysis? Second, what are the consequences for our understanding of the public and private costs of permacrisis over time? To answer these questions, this paper examines the trajectories and experiences of those struggling in the deepest forms of poverty in the UK. By doing so, we evidence greater heterogeneity in low-income experiences and trajectories, and shed new light on the severity of social harms often obscured from and through poverty analysis. Taking diverse individual experiences as empirical *patterns* that are difficult to observe (Fitzpatrick et al., 2013), we focus on the absences that are generated by deepening poverty and seek to rethink their significance in the exercise of necropolitical governance in postcolonial studies as well as academic and applied understanding of class restructuring in poverty analysis.

## Methods

### *The research study*

This paper draws on qualitative longitudinal, ethnographic research conducted with 40 people living on a *very* low income across one city in the North of England over an 18-month period (April 2022 - September 2023). Particular efforts were taken to not only better capture and retain the lived experiences of those in deeper forms of poverty, but to also better account for a broader range of experience than is typically achieved in poverty analysis (Jolly et al., 2022, Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2023, Edmiston, 2024).

First, to better capture the lived experiences of those in deeper forms of poverty, all participants recruited had a net equivalised household income that fell at least 40% below median incomes, but the vast majority fell more than 50% below the poverty line at the time of the first interview. Over half were experiencing ‘destitution’, that is, lacking access to at least two essential items (shelter, food, heating, lighting, clothing and footwear and basic toiletries) in the last month, or living on ‘an extremely low income’ (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). Second, a heterogeneous sampling strategy was adopted to capture the people (and the ‘multiple causal mechanisms’ (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 3) conditioning their experience) that are oftentimes ‘disappearing’, ‘excluded’, ‘missing’ or under-represented in distributional analysis and recruitment sites in qualitative poverty research. As such, those living in the NPH were oversampled at the outset, with 6 people in temporary accommodation taking part in the research. In addition, one person with an asylum application under consideration, one refugee recently granted indefinite leave to remain and one ‘undocumented migrant’ were invited and agreed to take part. Finally, two participants were recruited who did not speak English, with interpreters supporting communication through the course of fieldwork.

Third, to achieve a more inclusive recruitment strategy, invitations to take part in the research were publicised through a variety of mediums and networks: leaflets and posters were circulated in civic spaces such as community centres, cafes, libraries, food banks, a crisis housing drop-in service, the premises of statutory services and community groups; study adverts were shared in community newsletters and social media posts, sometimes via community organisations, practitioners and local authority services. A significant minority of participants were recruited through snowballing techniques via friends, neighbours or family. Finally, people were also recruited through local support, advice and emergency aid organisations who signposted prospective participants. Crucially, gatekeepers were asked to pass on study information to prior service users as well as current service users.

Taken together, this made it possible to recruit a broader range of people financially struggling who had less contact with local support organisations and public services. For example, three participants were not claiming any social security despite considerable financial difficulty, and five were not accessing any charitable aid or support from local organisations around the time of their first interview. Through these steps, it was possible to recruit a diverse sample that broadly reflects the ‘stratified nature of reality’ through the diverse profile, drivers and effects of deep poverty in the UK (Hastings, 2021: 753; Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). Appendix 1 details the demographic, household and employment characteristics of participants.

Recruited participants were invited to take part in two in-depth interviews with a 12-month gap between the first and the second. A total of 76 formal interviews were conducted (with 40 participants in Wave 1 and 36 participants in Wave 2). The study adopted a prospective longitudinal design in combination with retrospective life history accounts ‘to enable the causes

and consequences of change to be understood ‘backwards’, from the vantage point of the present’ (Neale et al., 2012: 5). Guided by critical realist frameworks of complex, emergent, and non-linear explanation, such a strategy made it possible to explore the multiple ‘layers’ of micro-biographical details and critical moments through which change occurred, as well as the degree and types of agency participants were able to exert across different lives and contexts (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 15). Rather than a flat account of ‘single triggers’, our research design allowed us to ‘identify common patterns that can be explained by the qualitative nature of recurring antecedents’ to better understand the contingent pathways into and out of deep poverty (Fitzpatrick et al., 2013: 150). Appendix 2 provides further details about the format and length of interviews, as well as research activities beyond the remit of the data analysis in this paper, that nonetheless complemented fieldwork, analysis and ethical considerations throughout the research.

Due to the challenging, often volatile circumstance of participants, a tailored retention strategy was adopted to minimise sample attrition and ensure the experiences of those *worst* affected by permacrisis were reflected in subsequent analysis. First, participants received a £40 shopping voucher of their choice for each interview as a ‘thank you’ for their time. Second, participants were asked to provide their addresses, telephone numbers, email addresses if they had these, as well as the contact details of a nominated contact. Third, informal contact was made with participants throughout. Finally, when telephone or text re-contact was unsuccessful, alternative contact details were used to ask whether people still wanted to take part in the study. For reasons detailed below, the extreme financial situation of some people meant their contact details changed, sometimes multiple times, through the course of fieldwork. Reaching out to participants again via friends, family, support workers and support organisations made it possible to re-initiate contact. Given this approach, special efforts were made to stress the voluntary nature of the research at each point of re-contact through the course of establishing informed consent.

#### *Looking sideways: retaining and recovering transitions*

Through diachronic and synchronic analysis of retrospective and current data, we explored the fluid nature of life on a low income and the ‘conjunctures’ of public crises that are ‘woven’ into personal biographies (Hall, 2019: 485). Doing so made it possible to explore contingent practices of agency ‘depending on conditions’ of circumstance, time and place that mediated the trajectories of individuals (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 3). Of particular interest, were the cumulative ‘tipping points’ into *deep* poverty, specifically, the chronicity of this experience and how this was shaped by broader structural events and mechanisms (Fitzpatrick, 2005). In Appendix 3, we outline the patterned ‘tipping points’ of participants and how these shaped their broader trajectories leading up to the core fieldwork period. Through the observations below, we demonstrate how longitudinal analysis can evidence trajectories ‘up’ or ‘down’ (moving between ascribed social categories), but it can also go further to reflect on transitions ‘sideways’ that push certain people and degrees of privation beyond the sociological gaze. We do so to contextualise transitions observed during the research study (detailed below) in order ‘to better understand the mechanisms of entries and exists, and how the mechanisms driving [deep poverty] change over the life course for different people in different contexts’ (Hastings, 2021: 751-2).

Through the course of fieldwork, the cost-of-living crisis worsened the financial situation of all participants with the value of their disposable income worth much less over time. In terms of transitions, most participants (61%) were still in deep poverty by Wave 2 with incomes that were either the same (35%) or worse (26%). The remainder (39%) had increased their income



to a point that lifted them above 40% of median incomes (one of the less stringent measures of deep poverty). As detailed in Appendix 3, changes to social security entitlement and paid employment were the two ‘protective factors’ that made the biggest difference to improving livelihoods over time (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 15). At Wave 1, most participants were unemployed with only 3 undertaking paid work. However, just under a third of all participants had engaged in some kind of paid work by Wave 2. For most though, poor remuneration, zero-hour contracts, fluctuating health conditions, childcare and transport costs were the key mechanisms that made it difficult to sustain continuous employment. For those escaping deep poverty, attainment of ancillary or disability-related social security proved the most transformational. Conversely, where these payments were stopped, this was typically devastating to the financial position of participants.

In Wave 2, formal interviews were conducted with 36 (90%) of the original sample and information was gathered on the circumstances of two further participants via informal discussions (38 in total, or 95%). Sourcing additional and alternative contact details from participants proved essential to minimising attrition, where the retention rate would have otherwise been much lower (63%) by Wave 2. Deep poverty often triggered considerable upheaval and disruption in the lives of those affected with debts, bailiffs, evictions and pawning household items often discussed by affected participants. As a result, almost a third (12) had either lost, sold, pawned or changed their telephone and the same proportion of participants (12) had moved to different or lost accommodation during fieldwork. Crucially, those falling into deeper forms of poverty were much more likely to move and change their contact details: 70% of those with worse incomes had done so, compared to only 28% of those whose incomes had remained the same or improved (see Appendix 3). By retaining their experiences, it was possible to explore how the slow violence of permacrisis corrupted the lives of participants over time, and particularly how it affected those who might otherwise have been lost or missing in the research process.

### **Not coping, barely surviving**

Often intended to challenge portrayals of passive victimhood, qualitative poverty research is replete with *generative* accounts of agency in low-income life (Lister, 2021). Such work details the diverse ways in which people set boundaries, budget, make do, improvise, and problem-solve to cope during and through financial difficulty (e.g. Pemberton et al., 2017). The premise of ‘coping’ though implies a potential and practice of managing to deal with or overcome difficulty, even when this involves considerable energy, struggle and sacrifice. Namely, that there is scope ‘for human agency within the range of options that these structures enable’ (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 6). The capacity to do so though depends on a minimum level of social, material and affective resources. Ultimately, there is a point at which poverty becomes so severe that coping is no longer possible.

### *Material strategies*

Participants described how their incomes fell so far below the (rising) cost of living, that they were left with no option but to ‘go without’. Participants routinely went hungry and cold, could not wash, rest, or use household appliances because there was ‘nothing left’ to cover the associated costs. Material strategies within private spaces and domestic spaces then were characterised more by deficiency; by ‘cut backs’ rather than trade-offs or substitution:

*We have to eat less than we used to.*

**Edgar<sup>1</sup>, Wave 1**

*I am going hungry half the time and going cold because I can't get my electric on and I am isolated because I can't get to places.*

**Abi, Wave 2**

To mitigate the worst effects of deep poverty, the majority of those interviewed had to take out loans, debts or pawn household items to pay for necessities. These *defensive* acts were necessary to meeting pressing basic needs but often made it harder for participants to escape from extreme financial hardship with people trapped in a 'vicious cycle' of 'robbing Peter to pay Paul'. Wesley – a single unemployed man living alone in temporary accommodation – fell into debt after his wife became ill and their relationship broke down. After suffering health problems of his own, Wesley lost his job and experienced an extended period of homelessness. At the time of Wave 1, Wesley was struggling with rising food and energy prices, and was increasingly relying on credit from formal and informal lenders to cover the basics:

*I've borrowed money from backstreet loans and it's extortionate what I'm paying back... I've had to borrow off people just to pay the loan sharks. It's ridiculous... And I have missed a few [repayments] and it's gone up and gone up and gone up. Wesley, Wave 1*

By Wave 2, Wesley was receiving additional disability-related benefits but was still struggling: a growing proportion of his weekly income was servicing debts for historical and ongoing consumption. As a result, he was having to access a food pantry on a regular basis and walked considerable distances because he couldn't afford public transport. For many like Wesley, negative budgets profoundly destabilised household provisioning with people left with little choice but to stop using gas and electricity altogether when energy prices spiked. To try and keep warm over the winter, several participants described retreating to one room in their accommodation. Others sold higher-value possessions such as televisions, leaving phones as their sole source of entertainment and social connection.

*Defensive* strategies of survival regularly undermined longer-term abilities to keep clean, warm, dry and safe. Accommodation was often bare, with no carpets, curtains or paint. Several participants went months without cookers or stoves to prepare food. When participants felt more at ease to share the detail of their ordinary routines, they disclosed an extraordinary level of suffering, demonstrating how everyday lives and trajectories were framed and constrained by international pressures and national shocks (Neal and Murji, 2015). For example, Judith descended rapidly into financial hardship after she was assaulted at work and subsequently made redundant. Having 'worked all my life', Judith, initially struggled to make and sustain a claim for benefits. With no income for several months she quickly fell into arrears. At the time of Wave 1, Judith was relying on 'food parcels' and 'electric vouchers' to bridge the gap and was struggling with her mental health. By Wave 2, Judith had 'lost weight' because 'prices have gone up'. Over time, Judith exhausted ad hoc support available from her local networks, with the sacrifices she made becoming increasingly chronic and profound.

*I didn't have my heating on at all. Three times in the last year... I couldn't afford it... I was just living in the bedroom basically... just keeping one room*

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout.



*warm then. Not with the heating, just with myself sitting on the bed, you know?*

**Judith, Wave 2**

Despite the ubiquity of the everyday in sociological analysis, these experiences are far from mundane, taken-for-granted or insignificant. On the contrary, these everyday struggles and losses (i.e. non-doings and non-beings) are seldom seen or heard, particularly for those falling into the deepest forms of financial crisis.

### *Affective strategies*

Experiencing more acute forms of social exclusion over time, the highly intimate suffering unfolding in domestic contexts was also often concealed by participants themselves, either because they were ‘ashamed’ or didn’t want to be ‘a burden to people’.

*And me neighbours started noticing me losing weight. And, obviously, I put a front on and I go, “Oh, it’s my medication”.*

**Alison, Wave 2**

Such behaviours reveal an ambivalence in the subjectivity of those struggling on the lowest incomes. In certain respects, many participants discussed feelings of personal failure, defeat and relative unworthiness, demonstrating the social hierarchies reproduced and internalised by those suffering the worst effects of permacrisis, with evaluations made about their own position and others, as moral agents (Sayer, 2005). Here, it was clear how class restructuring and anti-welfare politics had injured people’s sense of self-worth through successive crises (Sennett and Cobb, 2023). That said, many participants also critiqued existing social arrangements and were keen to affirm their right to recognition, support and dignity. For example, many had sought to appeal negative benefit decisions, liaise with (social) landlords, apply for alternative housing and jobs, or request adjustments and easements with utility providers to try and make life more ‘manageable’. However, these efforts were largely ignored or unsuccessful and contributed towards a sense of hopelessness where participants felt like they were ‘getting nowhere’ with ‘no choice’ despite their best efforts.

At the time of Wave 1, Abi was unemployed and appealing the withdrawal of her disability-related benefits (PIP). A survivor of domestic violence with serious physical and mental conditions, Abi was trying to access the support she needed from government agencies and local charities throughout the course of fieldwork. She had previously attended a local voluntary group but was no longer eligible for time-limited assistance and struggled to engage with other local organisations. By Wave 2, Abi had lost her appeal for PIP and fallen deeper into poverty. She rarely left her flat, slept and ate very little, and had sold her television. Abi felt that front-line service workers and practitioners were either unresponsive or hostile to her requests for help, leaving her ‘stressed on my own’. Whilst Abi felt powerless, she nonetheless continued to challenge decisions taken by the DWP.

*I’ve had to reapply for it [PIP] and then they said no again, so next month I’m finally going to appeal... So it’s been quite hard, I haven’t had a lot of money... it’s like they’re not listening to me. Abi, Wave 2*

As Paton (2016: 195) explains, ‘it is the coercive elements of hegemony articulated through people’s lack of control that reveal the hidden injuries in processes’ of social transformation. Flowing from these injuries, was a feeling that ‘we don’t matter’ to those ‘in charge’ from many participants with modest desires for the future centred on reclaiming a modicum of respect and control.

*Sometimes I think it's like we don't matter. Especially, like, the lower class and the working class. Like, the further down you are, the less they consider you.*

**Eve, Wave 1**

*I'd love not to live around here, in all honesty... Basically be able to live, go out and not have to worry about relying on benefit...* **Hazel, Wave 2**

Far from *generative*, the subjectivity and agency of participants was orientated more towards survival, defending against the latest shock or constraint. The cumulative impact of this on many participants was a numbing effect, dragging life into the monochromatic where people quietly suffered 'day by day' because 'nothing ever changes'. Others talked and felt in a more technicolour register that was urgent and vivid, hyper-sensitive to the unpredictability of their lives, anxiously anticipating the latest crisis to unfold from 'one day to the next'.

### **A growing social distance in deep poverty**

Central to the governance of permacrisis in the UK has been the steady disassembling of state apparatus, interface and funds across local communities. The closure or increasingly constrained capacity of libraries, voluntary hubs, youth clubs, Sure Start centres, community halls and groups has diminished opportunities for social encounter and connection within and between unequal places (Crossley, 2017: 101). Despite this, local ecosystems of support proved a crucial lifeline for most participants who accessed crisis and emergency charitable support. With demand vastly outstripping supply though, participants described how access was being 'rationed', increasingly contingent upon stricter referral conditions and pathways. Some spent days trying to access support and ultimately 'gave up' after repeatedly being 'turned away'.

*I just tend to just go without rather than... Because like you try to ask somebody for something and it's a brick wall, you know what I mean...*

**Alison, Wave 2**

Whilst a small number of people volunteered in their local area, the majority were more focused on 'being able to survive'. As people fell deeper, they became less socially connected and visible. They 'stopped going out' due to the prohibitive costs and stress associated. Citing the cost of social activities, transport and food, participants sometimes described being 'house-bound' – 'becoming socially segregated' because they couldn't afford 'the entry tickets required for conventional social participation' (Sinclair, 1999: 49). Reading the outside world as a hostile place, many also retreated or confined themselves to their accommodation. Here though, 'home' was less a refuge and more a costly trap – 'a mouth that eats up their money before they start to buy food themselves. In attempts to cope, they cut themselves off from others' (Sinfield, 1985: 203).

*It's horrible and you're not living, you're just existing.*

**Alice, Wave 1**

*I mean we don't really go out anywhere anymore, owt like that. Because you spend that much money on everything else...*

**Eloise, Wave 2**

Increasingly isolated, participants' (social) lives became smaller, quieter, focused on enduring the systemic violence of deepening poverty, rather than voice, participation or resistance. As a result, severe and multiple forms of disadvantage were often 'hidden away' from family, friends and public view (Johnsen and Blenkinsopp, 2024: 13). For example, as the financial

situation of Malik deteriorated, so did his social participation and visibility. At the time of Wave 1, Malik – a young man lacking the necessary documentation to legally live and work in the UK – was volunteering at a foodbank in return for food and living with extended family. He submitted an immigration application and managed to pick up some short-term informal work whilst he waited on the outcome, with initial improvements in his standard of living and a widening social network. However, when Malik's immigration application was rejected, he had to move to the outskirts of the city and stopped volunteering and attending the foodbank as regularly.

*I couldn't believe myself, firstly it was going good, but since that time till now, just like going all the way down. Malik, Wave 2*

By Wave 2, Malik was sleeping on the sofa of a friend's house and rarely left his accommodation. This was partly due to the fear of being caught by the immigration authorities but also because he couldn't afford to see people or do anything. With no income, Malik was relying on food handouts from his flatmates and irregular gifts of '£5 so I can buy something on my own'. Without phone credit, he struggled to stay in contact with friends and family 'back home' and led an increasingly solitary existence.

Kinship networks were both bonded and broken through deepening poverty. For many participants, everyday acts of care and reciprocity were central to survival (Hill et al., 2021). As was the case for Malik, lending and borrowing food, household items or money were commonplace for many. Participants routinely provided childcare and emotional support, troubleshooted life administration or cooked with friends, family and neighbours to save money. The rising cost of living had pushed some families and friends together with several participants moving (back) in with others because they 'had nothing', but it also tore other families apart.

*It were that bad I had to send my daughter back to live with her mum, because I couldn't afford to have her here. I even had to go and stay at my mums because I couldn't even afford to stay here. I had no food in, no nothing.*

**Barry, Wave 2**

Support from family was drawn on and gradually run down in the management of deep poverty. Feelings of indebtedness, guilt and shame amongst participants were widespread, particularly when they had to rely on help from others who were 'struggling themselves'. At times, this caused tensions within kinship circles revealing the inherent fragilities and 'inter-relational knottiness of crises' (Hall, 2019: 487) that mediate opportunities for immediate survival and future progression.

*I think the rest of the family are all in the same boat, so they're asking me for stuff and I am like "I have only got enough for mine, I don't have enough to help you out as well".*

**Thea, Wave 2**

Zahra, a single parent of two young children, lived in a small back-to-back terraced house and relied heavily on family members for support. At Wave 1, Zahra was in college and preparing for her exams. She had also recently secured a trial part-time job at a local supermarket and was feeling hopeful about the prospect of clearing her debts and having 'food in the house and money over. Also gas and electric...'. Zahra's mum would 'help out most of the time' with childcare, and regularly paid for items and expenses. By Wave 2, Zahra's part-time job had

been made permanent and she had managed to increase her hours a little. However, her overall standard of living had deteriorated because ‘everything’s just going up isn’t it’. As a result, she ‘didn’t really go out doing anything’ and would ‘see people less’. Conscious of her own mother’s financial situation, Zahra felt unable to ask for any more help due to the pressure this was putting on their relationship.

*I haven’t asked her for a long time... because she’s sick of me asking. Zahra,*  
**Wave 2**

The shame attached to receiving help and a desire ‘to be strong’ for friends and family in ‘the same boat’ often meant participants withdrew from social networks. As a result, friends and family rarely knew the full extent and severity of suffering participants were enduring (even when support was being received). This contributed towards a sense of alienation with the pressure and isolation described as ‘exhausting’.

*I’ve just ended up cutting myself off from them. Ellie, Wave 1*

Whilst deepening poverty generated new dependencies across low-income biographies, it tended to compromise social connectedness and relationships over time. It made the lives and suffering of participants less present, often shrouded within and from local networks, even in anti-poverty spaces. In many ways, the social distance of participants from the wider majority exemplifies the ‘hidden injuries of class’ that routinely play out and cultivate collective identification within low-income communities (Paton, 2016, Sennett and Cobb, 2023). However, the degradations of *deep* poverty – where the dynamics of accumulation through dispossession are at their most animate – went further, alienating participants from their former lives, networks and community. Here, the injuries of class restructuring and permacrisis were *hidden further* from public view, often leading to social disidentification and solitary suffering. Deep poverty then is not solely more precarious; it also exhibits distinctive features and dynamics that raise broader questions about the extent to which the social harms associated with necropolitical governance and class restructuring are rendered visible through the methods and theoretical frameworks currently employed in poverty analysis.

### **Fading away**

Whilst participants were affected by permacrisis in diverse ways, many described how past recessions, local disinvestment ‘with the cuts and everything’, welfare reforms and COVID-19 had worn away at their resources, health, relationships and resilience (Hughes and Tarrant, 2023). With additional pressures and constraints mounting due to the rising cost of living, people found it increasingly difficult to weather financial shocks. Unable to manage, two participants became street homeless during the study, with one person turning to sex work to survive. Through the course of fieldwork, participants had experienced heart attacks, strokes, worsening mobility, gum disease, tooth loss, back pain, bowel problems, insomnia, panic attacks, anxiety, depression, breathing problems, weight loss, weight gain, swelling and fibromyalgia. Participants often connected deteriorating health to their financial situation.

*I’d had to rely more and more on the food bank... it’s just all so processed. I have actually had, without going into too much detail, gut and bowel problems as a result, which has been very, very unpleasant... it keeps you alive. It’s not necessarily very good for you.*

**Alexander, Wave 2**

*Last winter just gone I didn't put my heating on once. Not once... and I slept on the sofa all winter. Because, but that were it as well I've been diagnosed with asthma since I last saw you. Because my breathing's been really bad.*

**Sandra, Wave 2**

A large minority of people (one fifth) disclosed that the stress and pressure associated with struggling on 'nothing' had led to suicidal ideation or previous attempts to take their own life. Others described how friends or neighbours had died by 'suicide because they couldn't afford to live'. Joanne, a woman in her fifties, described the pressure and 'stress' that accumulated over time as her financial situation got 'worse and worse'. For most of her working life, Joanne had worked as cleaner and housekeeper with this taking a considerable toll on her body. When Joanne started to experience mobility problems, she went on sick leave but was eventually made redundant during the pandemic. Having lost several family members to COVID-19, Joanne was struggling with her mental health at Wave 1: 'I put a fake smile on my face, but deep down I'm not alright'. By Wave 2, Joanne had fallen further into arrears and had been unable to access additional disability-related support despite worsening health. Joanne's son had moved out, leaving her with less support in place to meet her day-to-day needs. Reflecting on her life, Joanne felt like she had 'experienced too much' and as her physical and mental deteriorated she started to have suicidal thoughts.

*And at the time when I got the tablets for my stress because sometimes it was like I was going to - I don't even want to put it like this but - just do something to myself... Things go through my head. I don't want to be here.*

**Joanne, Wave 2**

These experiences demonstrate the costs that are routinely borne and emerge within low-income communities as personal and structural crises collide in systematic ways (Hall, 2019). Postcolonial perspectives within poverty analysis demonstrate that, far from arbitrary, these social injuries that unfold reflect a series of value judgements about relative human worth, that determine whose lives are made and unmade liveable through the course of international shocks and domestic pressures (Mbembe, 2003). The social injuries inflicted on low-income communities are profound and patterned. Regressive welfare reforms and austerity have been linked to 330,000 excess deaths (Walsh and McCartney, 2023). These figures not only represent lives corrupted through deepening poverty; they represent lives lost through the governance of permacrisis. A consequence of this is that the social injuries of deepening poverty will only be counted amongst those who manage to survive:

*A major limitation of both, standard monetary (unidimensional) poverty headcount and poverty gap indices is that the premature death of poor people is reflected as a decrease in poverty over time (Neff, 2013: 320).*

Mayblin et al. (2020: 111) argue that 'necropolitics is, in its most *visible* form, governing through death'. However, as people die from malnutrition, cold and trauma they also move outwith the counting process in official poverty statistics and distributional analysis. In its purest expression then, the power of necropolitics is often *obscured* rather than *exposed* through social and corporeal death.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has sought to uncover the 'hidden injuries' of those often missing or lost in poverty analysis. Our findings demonstrate the ways in which these omissions shape wider academic and applied understanding of permacrisis and its *worst* effects, underestimating the extent and

severity of injuries it engenders. Focusing on everyday experiences as ‘sites and moments of translation’ (Neal and Murji, 2015: 811), this paper has adopted a ‘complex, emergent and non-linear explanatory framework’ to better account for the contingent, interrelated mechanisms that produce deepening privation (Fitzpatrick, 2005: 6). In terms of the outcomes and trajectories this engenders for those affected, our analysis suggests there are several distinctive dynamics, practices and experiences that tend to be associated with deep poverty. We summarise these below and consider what theoretical lessons such differences offer for the broader purchase of postcolonial perspectives and poverty analysis, particularly when it comes to questions of agency, visibility, belonging, accountability and social understanding.

As people fell deeper into poverty, the degree and form of agency they enacted changed – increasingly focused on *defensive* strategies of survival, delineating extreme hardship from the more general challenges of living on a low income. When resources fell so far below what was needed, ‘coping’ became untenable, with everyday routines characterised more by deficiency, than substitution or ‘getting by’ (Lister, 2021). Participants were left with little choice but to accumulate debts or pawn essential possessions, trapping some in hardships that were chronic, profound and intimate. People experiencing such forms of dispossession are often poorly reflected and served through prevailing modes of poverty analysis. In large part, this omission is due to the sampling, recruitment and retention strategies routinely adopted across qualitative and quantitative research on disadvantage.

That said, dispossession itself also pushes those experiencing extreme privation beyond the sociological gaze. Poverty pulls people to the margins, fuelling social isolation and exclusion (Sinfield, 1985). And participants in this study were no different: as people fell deeper into hardship their presence and participation in public and communal life diminished. However, this occurred even in those social spaces and support networks where people in poverty are often present; giving and receiving help in their local community (Hill et al., 2021). Trapped in or retreating to their accommodation, many quietly endured the injuries of extreme dispossession alone. Having crossed a line between ‘living’ and ‘not living’, many were subjected to and mourning a kind of social death, increasingly disconnected from the outside world. Whilst most recognised the wider exogenous factors that shaped their lives, they nonetheless internalised poverty stigma, often hiding the extent and severity of their privation. Financial hardships were not only hidden from the wider social majority *within* low-income communities, the degree and severity of poverty was also hidden *from* low-income spaces and support networks. Our findings then show that when class restructuring is at its most animate, the ‘hidden injuries’ of deep poverty don’t solely estrange people from the wider collective as previous research has suggested (Paton, 2016, Sennett and Cobb, 2023), they go *further* to alienate people from their former lives, future selves, and low-income communities. A consequence of deep poverty in particular then is that the injuries borne over time become much harder to see, know and surface.

Reflecting on the slow violence of deep poverty, this paper demonstrates how necropolitics extends beyond the bordering, racial ‘logics of unequal humanity’ (Mayblin et al., 2020) to a wider constituency of classed citizens and subjects deemed disposable in the face of permacrisis. By doing so, we have sought to demonstrate the broader purchase of necropolitics as a diagnostic framework closely linked to postcolonial studies, and specifically how this might be brought into closer conversation with prevailing class and poverty analysis. Our findings demonstrate how the governance of successive crises has undermined health and well-being, resulting in the premature death of poorer people at its most extreme. In this respect, time is a weapon of necropolitics because of the ‘slow bureaucratic accumulation of harm and



deaths' that make it harder to draw connections between cause and effect (Mills and Pring, 2023: 7). Arguably though, time is also a weapon of necropolitics because it produces *absence* – absence of the poorest people who have suffered the worst consequences of permacrisis and class restructuring.

Questions of visibility within sociology have typically pivoted on the opportunities and risks associated with social demarcation, especially class distinction (Boltanski, 1979). However, sociologists of class have tended to pay less attention to the methodological frameworks that can lead to the co-option, erasure or misrepresentation of the *most* marginalised, particularly for those experiencing the deepest forms of poverty (cf. Adair, 2005). In response, this paper has demonstrated the value of paying greater attention to time and visibility when it comes to both theory and method in poverty analysis. When people fall outwith the research process and sociological gaze over time because of deepening privation, our analysis has demonstrated why the resultant 'missing data' should be recognised as a data point in and of itself. The *unmarked* or *once marked* in this context are not devoid of information or meaning. Postcolonial studies of necropolitics encourage us to rethink this absence as meaningful: reflecting a significance and severity of social injuries that needs to be better incorporated into and accounted for in poverty analysis. A temporal lens has productively been used to better understand both the *experience* and *chronicity* of poverty (Millar, 2007). However, as demonstrated in this paper, a temporal lens can also prove productive for understanding the *visibility* of poverty and its legitimisation. Namely, whose privation is retained, recovered and made visible through the methodological choices we make in sociological analysis, and the dynamics of deepening poverty that risk absencing the poorest from the wider public imaginary.

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