

# 'You Can't Sacrifice Nothing': Exploring the Lived Realities of Chronic Poverty in a Cost-of- Living Crisis Through Participatory Research

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/crs](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/crs)**Holly White, Nancy Evans and Kim Ross** 

University of Chester, UK

## Abstract

The current portrayal of the cost-of-living crisis as an isolated, unexpected issue neglects the ongoing struggles of those in chronic poverty. This article utilises agnotology and zemiology to explore these overlooked experiences. Through the use of participatory research, the article reveals the state's neglect of chronic poverty amid public discourse on the cost-of-living crisis, and critiques proposed solutions that demand further sacrifices from those already suffering. The article highlights the lack of accountability for neoliberal policies that exacerbate poverty and vulnerability. It exposes the institutional violence and stigma against the structurally vulnerable, whose hardships are normalised. Through a zemiological and agnotological lens, the article stresses the need to reframe the cost-of-living crisis by acknowledging chronic harm and amplifying the voices of those experiencing entrenched poverty. This reframing is crucial, not only during times of crisis, but also within the broader context of systemic structural inequality.

## Keywords

zemiology, agnotology, cost-of-living crisis, poverty, chronic harm, neoliberalism, participatory methods

## Introduction

Since late 2021, the cost-of-living issue has been narrated by the Government, oppositional political parties and mainstream media outlets as a novel state of *crisis*. On one level, this narration reflects the tangible conditions of acute insecurity observable in the current moment, whereby a

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### Corresponding authors:

Holly White, Division for Social and Political Science, University of Chester, Exton Park, Parkgate Road, Chester CHI 4BJ, UK.  
Email: [h.white@chester.ac.uk](mailto:h.white@chester.ac.uk)

Nancy Evans, Division for Social and Political Science, University of Chester, Exton Park, Parkgate Road, Chester CHI 4BJ, UK.  
Email: [nancy.evans@chester.ac.uk](mailto:nancy.evans@chester.ac.uk)

Kim Ross, Division for Social and Political Science, University of Chester, Exton Park, Parkgate Road, Chester CHI 4BJ, UK.  
Email: [kim.ross@chester.ac.uk](mailto:kim.ross@chester.ac.uk)

culmination of interlinked local and global pressures have led to rising inflation, and therefore amplified the cost of household energy, road fuel, food, and consumer goods and services (Francis-Devine et al., 2023). Furthermore, the effects of increased living costs have been exacerbated by accompanying rises in National Insurance and Council Tax, a freeze on the Income Tax threshold, below-inflation increases in benefits and the National Living Wage, together with increasing rent costs, particularly for social housing tenants, reducing real incomes from wages and benefits (Francis-Devine et al., 2023), warranting the label of crisis.

However, this article takes a critical and historically informed view of the current conditions and their public narration, situating the cost-of-living crisis, not as a one-off, isolated event, but as both an outcome of decades of neoliberal policy decisions, and a symptom of state and economic failure. Crises can be observed as a recurrent theme within British state politics, whereby issues are momentarily brought to the forefront of public attention through a period of intense political and media narration (Davis and White, 2023). This includes selectively narrating the supposed *causes* of the crisis, often concealing the deeper, more chronic, structural problems underpinning or precipitating crisis moments, and then proposing a “solution” to the problem, which conveniently tends to align with and warrant the desired economic and policy agendas (Hall et al., 1978, Hall, 1988; Hay, 1996, 1999, 2009). State-narrated crises can therefore be understood as ‘politically mediated and ideologically filtered construction(s)’ (Hay, 1999: 334), ultimately functioning to preserve and strengthen state power (Hay, 1996, 1999, 2009).

This process of crisis construction can be observed in two key moments within the neoliberal era: first, the narration of crisis precipitating the ascendance of Thatcher and the New Right from 1979, and more recently, the rhetoric of crisis which legitimated the implementation and continued rollout of the austerity agenda from 2008. In these moments, the implementation and deepening of the neoliberal agenda have been proposed as the only solution to the narrated conditions of crisis, yet far from “fixing” the acute crises they purport to address, neoliberal policies can be seen to have created and progressively deepened social, political and economic uncertainties, and a state of chronic *disaster* for the working class (Calafati et al., 2022; Hall, 1988; Harvey, 2005).

Within the dominant state–public narration of the current cost-of-living crisis and the proposed solutions offered, both the root causes of the crisis, and the enduring struggle for the structurally vulnerable, are entirely unacknowledged and invisible. Conversely, financial insecurity is framed as a short-term, universally experienced problem, to be remedied through interim policy measures and individualised cutbacks to household expenditure, rendering the underpinning, chronically enduring and harmful state and economic failures, unseen. Moreover, in positioning the current crisis as one in which everybody must make sacrifices, this state–public construction neglects the disproportionate structural harms faced by those who were already in chronically precarious circumstances long before the current cost-of-living crisis, serving to preserve the status quo through wilful ignorance. Drawing upon and connecting the theoretical concepts of *zemiology*, the study of social harm, and *agnotology*, the analysis of the cultural production of ignorance, this article illuminates and challenges the inaccuracy of dominant narratives of the cost-of-living crisis, and highlights the simultaneous and longstanding deliberate concealment of chronic poverty.

Participatory research, entailing a collaborative workshop and interviews, aimed to counter such ignorance through illuminating the everyday realities of a small group of people with lived and living experience of long-term poverty. Through amplifying these unheard voices and perspectives, this research critically reframes mainstream narratives of poverty and the cost-of-living crisis, offering more accurate counter-narratives informed by lived experience. The accounts of chronic precarity documented in the research are situated within the broader trajectory of neoliberal policy decisions, particularly during and since the austerity era, which have inflicted enduring, yet normalised and ignored, harm on the most structurally vulnerable. Rather than a momentary

crisis, this research reframes the everyday struggle to meet living costs as a structurally embedded “chronic disaster”, through undertaking a zemiology of state politics. As Roitman (2013) argues, crisis is an elusive and underexplored concept within the social sciences, and a ‘blind spot for the production of knowledge’ (p. 13). Through a detailed examination of the ubiquitous mobilisation of the term crisis in the public narration of global events, Roitman (2013) makes the case for continued critical analysis of crisis as a device utilised to elevate certain narratives, while concealing others. The section that follows elucidates the theoretical framework informing our analysis, which builds upon Roitman’s exploration of the narrative utility of crisis, and brings together the critical concepts of zemiology and agnotology, to develop an understanding of the ideological construction of crises and their discursive function in generating ignorance to chronic harm.

## **Acute Crises and the Deliberate Concealment of Chronic Disasters**

### *Acute Crises and Their Narration*

The current cost-of-living crisis is just a part of the ongoing turbulence in British politics, particularly since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, echoing the globally observed condition of “permacrisis” (Zuleeg et al., 2021). Over the past four years, a series of acute crises, including Brexit mismanagement, inadequate responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, the “partygate” scandal, political resignations and elections, economic inconsistencies, and the most significant industrial unrest in over three decades, have compounded this sense of instability. One after the other, each acute crisis represents a fleeting moment of high politics and frenetic action, characterised by intense public narration (Davis and White, 2023). While these acute crises are framed as standalone moments, they represent interconnected symptoms of deeper structural issues within the neoliberal state and economy. Furthermore, the chronic, yet disastrous, harms that stem from such conditions are actively ignored and rendered absent from mainstream public discourse.

Indeed, when an acute crisis momentarily dominates the state–public agenda, this attention is not determined by the extent or threat of harm that ensues, but by the power of those setting the agenda, and the perceived social value of those harmed. Such events take the form of an “intense narration moment” (Davis and White, 2023), whereby groups that dominate communication hold the position of ‘primary definers’, primarily politicians, whose narrative forms the official version or ‘primary definition’ of reality, ‘framing’ ‘the problem’ and therefore setting ‘the limit for all subsequent discussion’ and public–political attention (Hall et al., 1978: 57). The label of crisis is ubiquitously applied in many different contexts, and can be viewed as a powerful and political narrative device invoked by dominant groups to frame particular issues, with the effect that, ‘certain questions become possible while others are foreclosed’ (Roitman, 2013: 1). Through this ideological process of crisis narration, acute crises are decontextualised from their structural roots, rendering the deeper and more chronic, underpinning and interconnected issues invisible. Furthermore, the chronic disastrous harms that ensue remain largely hidden from view, becoming embedded as normalised, routine and unexceptional social conditions, which do not warrant intervention.

### *Chronic Disasters and the Construction of Zemiogenic Ignorance*

Unlike acute crises, chronic disasters are kept off or held down the state–public political agenda, marked by silence and indifference. The ideological construction of zemiogenic ignorance – ignorance to social harm, that is, in itself, socially harmful – ensures that chronic disastrous harm fails to gain political and public attention (Davis and White, 2023). The absence of intense narration,

responses, accountability and proposed solutions, both reflects and reproduces state–public political ignorance of the lived reality of state-induced chronic disastrous harm, violence and suffering. As Kramer (1985) highlights, ‘the state and its legal order are both shaped by and reflect the interests of a particular socio-economic order’ (p. 475). This process can be theorised through the related concept of agnotology, the study of the cultural induction of ignorance (Proctor, 2008), functioning to construct and retain public and political ‘acquiescence in mass harm’ (Barton et al., 2018: 14). The concepts of zemiology and agnotology therefore provide a framework for exploring prominent cases of chronic disastrous harm that have been intentionally obfuscated and prevented from achieving significance on the state–public political agenda. As will be illustrated throughout the article, the deliberate production of ignorance and lack of accountability surrounding the social harm of poverty reflect and compound the devaluation of those harmed.

This process of the state’s deliberate concealment of catastrophic harm can be observed across a varied range of examples. Over the course of the 20th century, corporate power coupled with state apathy prevented asbestos lethality from becoming an acute crisis on the British state–public political agenda, despite the disastrous harm it caused (Barton et al., 2018). Furthermore, through the example of the Holocaust, Barton et al. (2018: 24) describe how ‘wilful ignorance’, alongside ‘lies, myths and catastrophic anti-knowledges’, underpinned and enabled such catastrophic harm to ensue. To take another illustrative example, racial inequality in criminal justice has remained a long entrenched structural harm, receiving a pitiful degree of state and public attention. Despite the heightened focus brought about by the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, which sparked a brief period of intense scrutiny regarding racism and injustice, substantial policy and procedural reforms are hindered by the influence of powerful interests who dictate which perspectives and experiences are considered significant, and which are ignored and misrepresented. Narratives which support established interests are legitimised, preserving existing hierarchies of perceived social value. This process will be further demonstrated in the following section, in reference to the exploitation and ideological construction of crises, and ongoing wilful indifference to the chronic harm of poverty characterising the neoliberal era.

## **Crises, Chronic Harm and the Neoliberal State**

### *Ideologically Constructed Crisis Narratives*

State crisis can be defined not merely as a ‘condition of rupture and breakdown’, but also as a ‘process’, in which such conditions can be exploited to legitimise ‘decisive intervention’ and ‘transformation’ (Hay, 1996: 253). This process can be notably observed in the narration of crisis in the late 1970s, which legitimated neoliberal structural transformation (Hall et al., 1978; Hall, 1988; Hay, 1996, 1999, 2009). The ascendance of Thatcher and the New Right neoliberal agenda in 1979 was facilitated by the discursive crafting of a ‘collective mythology’ of crisis in the minds of the British public (Hay, 1996: 253). Indeed, conditions of acute social and economic instability in the winter of 1978, ominously termed by *The Sun* newspaper as the “winter of discontent”, were strategically and ideologically exploited to warrant radical state transformation (Hay, 1996, 1999). The mediated narration of such conditions legitimated the ideological and political shifts from a Keynesian economy and welfare state, towards the pursuit of a deregulated, free market economy and progressive rollback of the state (Hall et al., 1978; Hall, 1988; Hay, 1996, 1999, 2009).

Similarly, later in the neoliberal era, the 2007/2008 global financial crisis provided the ideal conditions for the state-orchestrated narration of its causes and proposed solutions (Davis and White, 2023; Tyler, 2020). Although the true causes of the financial crisis stemmed from the neoliberal deregulation of global financial systems and the increasing unsustainability of global economic

inequalities (Cooper and Whyte, 2017), the supposedly overgenerous welfare expenditure of the previous government provided a convenient scapegoat, with David Cameron (2008) explicitly blaming a budget deficit under Gordon Brown's leadership. The narration of the acute crisis in the financial sector therefore led to the proposed "solution" of austerity to reduce the deficit. This entailed unprecedented cutbacks to public services, and the most radical and punitive raft of roll-backs and reforms to the British social security system since its inception (Dwyer and Wright, 2014; Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Wamsley, 2024).

Unlike the winter of discontent, however, the rhetoric of crisis following the financial crash was not used to justify the implementation of a radical *alternative* to the existing system (Hay, 2009), but rather, the crisis narrative was exploited to enable the deepening and strengthening of existing neoliberal power through further retraction of the British welfare state (Davis and White, 2023; Tyler, 2020). Since the implementation of the austerity agenda, the wealth and income of the elite, meanwhile, have continued to increase exponentially (Cooper and Whyte, 2017), furthering the neoliberal objective of redistributing wealth and power upwards (Harvey, 2005).

These events have been pivotal moments of social and economic transformation, each selectively constructing and exploiting narratives of crisis with the intention of securing and bolstering the legitimacy of the neoliberal state, while delegitimising and crowding out non-neoliberal alternatives (Hay, 1996, 1999, 2009; Wamsley, 2024). Furthermore, as will be detailed in the following section, such crisis moments have prompted and legitimised policy decisions and narratives that have harmed the poorest and least valued, whose chronic suffering has been routinely misrepresented and hidden from public view.

### *Neoliberalism and the Embedded Chronic Harm of Poverty*

The radical restructuring of the relationships between the state, the market and individual citizens over the past four decades of neoliberal governance has progressively weakened the position of the working class and exacerbated chronic vulnerability (Harvey, 2005; Wamsley, 2024). Indeed, post-1979, the neoliberal embrace of monetarism and a deregulated, free market capitalist economy, coupled with the progressive rollback of the social safety net, have actively encouraged the unrestricted growth of wealth in the highest paid sectors, while reducing the bargaining power, financial security and disposable income of the lowest paid and most structurally vulnerable (Calafati et al., 2022; Hall, 1988; Harvey, 2005). Income and wealth inequalities in Britain have widened significantly under neoliberal governance, with escalating poverty and structural vulnerability, alongside an increasing share of wealth being channelled upwards to the top income groups (Levitas, 2005; Wacquant, 2009).

Such interventions gained popular appeal partially due to the accompanying deployment of "divide-and-rule" politics' by the Thatcher government (Wamsley, 2024: 4), entailing the reinvigoration of the historically embedded, moralised dichotomy between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, and the recasting of poverty from a structural problem to be ameliorated by the state, to a matter of *individual* moral failure (Hall, 1988; Levitas, 2005; Morrison, 2019; Wamsley, 2024). In the climate of soaring unemployment and poverty in the early 1980s owing to significant economic restructuring and the managed decline of industry, the Thatcher government responded by reducing welfare benefits to widen the gap between wages and benefits, and tightening the eligibility criteria for accessing welfare support (Johnson, 1990; Levitas, 2005). Denying or obscuring the reality of 'the existence of poverty' and utilising victim-blaming strategies to 'blame the poor for their own situation' (Levitas, 2005: 14) helped to legitimise such policy shifts.

The neoliberal ideology which had reshaped the economy and welfare provision under Thatcher and then Major, was largely retained by Labour Prime Minister, Blair, after he was elected in 1997

following 18 years of Conservative rule. In an effort to rid the Labour party of its reputation for over-taxation and high public expenditure prior to Thatcher's ascendance (Harris, 2004), many key neoliberal policy assumptions around the economy and welfare state established under Conservative governments were preserved and even extended (Dwyer, 2004). Indeed, the divisive and punitive approach to welfare adopted previously was actively embraced, as seen in the extension of behavioural conditionality placed on claimants, such as "workfare" schemes, underpinned by the notion that the right to support must be contractually accompanied by the fulfilment of particular state-mandated responsibilities (Dwyer, 2004). The rhetoric of reciprocity and individual responsibility in welfare support continued under Labour leader, Gordon Brown (2007–2010).

During the austerity era, this punitive and conditional approach to poverty and social security provision was amplified further still. The austerity programme adopted following the global financial crisis of 2007/2008 entailed unprecedented cuts to public services, and the implementation of the most radical and punitive cuts and reforms to welfare provision since the welfare state's inception (Cooper and Whyte, 2017; Dwyer and Wright, 2014; Jensen and Tyler, 2015; Wamsley, 2024). Echoing the sentiments of previous governments surrounding so-called "undeserving" claimant groups, working-age social security provision was a core policy target (Cooper and Whyte, 2017), but the austerity programme redrew the boundaries of (un)deservingness to include groups previously exempt or protected somewhat from punitive forms of welfare conditionality, such as disabled people and lone parents (Wamsley, 2024).

The austerity project, estimated to have cut social security expenditure by £37 billion a year (Butler, 2018), exacerbated and normalised the unexceptional, routine conditions of struggle for the most vulnerable. A central policy in the austerity-led restructuring of the welfare state was the 2012 Welfare Reform Act (GOV UK, 2012). This entailed the rollout of Universal Credit from 2013, the introduction of new, more punitive conditions and commitments for claimants seeking work, the increasing remit and severity of sanctions for perceived non-compliance with such conditions, and the introduction of a Household Benefit Cap, and removal of the spare room subsidy or 'bedroom tax', to Housing Benefit recipients (GOV UK, 2012). Furthermore, the Act introduced unprecedented shifts to disability benefit entitlement and assessment, making financial support for disabled people more difficult to access, and reducing the amount awarded (Ryan, 2019; Stewart, 2016), and intensified Lone Parent Obligations (Dwyer and Wright, 2014; Haux and Whitworth, 2014; Hudson-Sharp et al., 2018; National Audit Office, 2016).

Disabled people (Reis and De Henau, 2018; Ryan, 2019) and those with mental health problems (Dwyer et al., 2020) have therefore been particularly affected. Moreover, austerity and welfare reform have gendered impacts (Greer-Murphy, 2018; Evans, 2022a, 2022b; Reis, 2018), with race and ethnicity (Hall et al., 2017) and disability status (Evans, 2022a; Reis and De Henau, 2018) intersecting with gendered inequalities. Alongside and in connection with the grinding, everyday forms of hardship imposed by austerity-driven welfare reforms, such policy shifts are implicated in a substantial number of deaths and suicides (Grover, 2019; Mills, 2018), leading commentators to term austerity as an insidious form of 'institutional violence' implemented by the state (Cooper and Whyte, 2017: 23). However, the 'bureaucratised face' and legitimate means through which this everyday 'institutional violence' is imposed (Cooper and Whyte, 2017: 23), together with the often 'slow, deteriorative process' (p. 24) by which it blights people's lives, economically, physically and psychologically, mean that it is often ignored and not recognised as violence, making it in some ways all the more powerful, pervasive and insidious than interpersonal violence (Pinker, 1970).

Austerity can therefore be considered as not merely an economic programme of reform, but an ideological project relying on deliberately inaccurate and misleading representations to generate public ignorance and consent for the unprecedented wave of cuts and reforms, making them appear

fair and necessary (Davis and White, 2023; Tyler, 2020). Westminster, collectively as supposedly “oppositional” parties, restricted debate within narrow boundaries, excluding non-neoliberal alternatives (Davis and White, 2023). The debate identified ideologically advantageous, but false, “causes” of crisis that were logically accompanied by the proposition and implementation of neoliberal alternatives as the only viable solution (Davis and White, 2023). Drawing upon agnotology, Slater (2012) details how the architects of welfare reform cited immoral behaviours as the cause of poverty in order to construct public ignorance to the structural causes, and justify punitive policy shifts. “Debate” during this era also operated to deliberately generate misunderstanding of Britain’s fiscal position, and, crucially, constructed neoliberal responses as moral imperatives, and as “fair” for the “hardworking” taxpayer (Davis and White, 2023). Stigmatising and divisive portrayals of social security claimants and the broader anti-welfare rhetoric driving these reforms have remained largely intact ever since, while the lived realities of those in chronic poverty are systematically ignored (Bolton et al., 2022; Evans, 2022a, 2022b; Patrick, 2016). Through supporting the platforming of voices of people with longstanding lived experience of poverty in the context of the current cost-of-living crisis, ignorance can be challenged. The following section outlines the methodological approach adopted to centre these experiences.

## Methodology

### Key Considerations

A fundamental aim of this research is to challenge the agnosis of the lived reality of violence, suffering and deprivation by those experiencing a cost-of-living *chronic disaster*. This corresponds with broader arguments that the role of public social science should be to address issues of human rights, social justice and public policy agendas, to raise awareness of, and challenge, injustices (Burawoy, 2005; Carrabine et al., 2020; Loader and Sparks, 2010). Responding to Yarbrough’s (2020: 58) call for academics to resist operating as ‘outsider experts’ who contribute to ‘oppressive knowledge production’, this research seeks to centre and amplify the perspectives of marginalised people. To align with the concerns about power relations within research, and to augment authenticity, this study has made use of a participatory approach, which can be described as seeking to ‘maximise the participation of people whose lives it researches’ (Yanar et al., 2016: 122). Ensuring that lived experience remains central to this research represents a crucial move towards confronting the longstanding ignorance surrounding chronic poverty.

Crucial to the participatory approach was the development of genuine long-term relationships with co-researchers, building upon existing partnerships between the University and stakeholders from the West Cheshire Poverty Truth Commission (PTC) and the Cheshire West and Chester Council Poverty Truth Team. As well as civic and business leaders within the city or region, PTCs include and elevate the voices of those who have lived experiences of hardship, to work collectively on addressing poverty. Crucial to the PTC is the philosophy, ‘nothing about us, without us, is for us’ (Poverty Truth Network, 2024), echoing the core underpinning tenet of participatory approaches - that research should be “with”, rather than “on” people (Park, 1992). This is particularly relevant when research is addressing issues affecting marginalised groups and imbued with power imbalances (Park, 1992), such as poverty (Banks et al., 2013). While this paper presents one aspect of this research collaboration, this has been part of a longer-term relationship built between the University-based research team and West Cheshire PTC.

Initial scoping meetings took place between the academic research team and West Cheshire PTC to discuss the aims of the research, as well as ideas for initial data collection methods.

These discussions identified media and political narratives of the cost-of-living crisis as a key area of concern for those who have entrenched experiences of poverty. The research team designed data collection methods in partnership with several members of West Cheshire PTC (research collaborators), including those who had lived or living experiences of poverty. In the case of the West Cheshire PTC, members with this experience are referred to as “Community Inspirers”. Community Inspirers are volunteers who use their own lived experience of poverty and hardship to raise awareness of the realities of poverty and to bring about change. The wider research sample was also drawn from the Community Inspirer group. There are 20 Community Inspirers ranging in age from 22 to 77 years. Three-quarters of them are female, and all identify as White British. The Community Inspirers who participated came from a range of backgrounds, including individuals who had lived in poverty throughout their lives, and those who had encountered adverse events leading to poverty, such as mental or physical health decline, domestic abuse and bereavement. These participants had experienced various challenges commonly associated with poverty, such as food insecurity, foodbank use, homelessness and debt. In addition, they faced intersecting vulnerabilities, including chronic health conditions and disabilities, neurodivergence, and poor mental health.

The data presented in this article is drawn from a multi-method approach, which facilitated increased representation of marginalised voices within the research, as well as allowing for a greater scope of data to be collected (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015). Full approval for this research was granted by the University of Chester Social and Political Science Research Ethics Committee.

### *Collaborative Workshop*

A participatory workshop exploring current media and political narratives of the cost-of-living crisis was co-designed by the researchers and research collaborators. The workshop was intended to enable comparison between political and journalistic constructions of poverty and the perceived cost-of-living crisis, and the lived realities of poverty. A rapid content analysis (Neuendorf, 2017) was carried out by a member of the research team to identify headlines that were broadly representative of different news publications, as well as quotations that considered the cost-of-living crisis from politicians across a variety of UK political parties. A range of relevant media headlines and quotations from politicians were selected by the research team and collaborators, to be used as elicitation devices, broadening the discussions within the workshop and helping to obtain a more authentic understanding of the impact that media messaging can have (Kormelink, 2020). The headlines and quotations reflected themes such as the cost-of-living crisis being a collective, universal experience, and prescribed responses to the crisis, such as the need to make sacrifices.

The workshop was conducted in February 2023 with N=18 Community Inspirers, who were presented with 10 quotations from UK politicians and media headlines that referred to the cost-of-living crisis. They were asked to vote on which they felt most accurately reflected their experiences, and those which were the most inaccurate. This activity was then used to elicit discussions regarding the Community Inspirers’ lived experiences of poverty, in addition to their perceptions regarding the framing of the cost-of-living crisis. Following this, the Community Inspirers worked collaboratively to rewrite the headlines and statements. This allowed for the interaction and collaborative discussion between attendees to form data (Cyr, 2016), thus providing a more representative account of the lived experiences of the zemiological consequences of the cost-of-living chronic disaster. Moreover, by utilising media and political headlines and quotes as elicitation tools, the researchers were able to gather data pertaining to specific and authentic contemporary narratives of poverty and the cost-of-living



crisis. The workshop also provided space for the academic research team and West Cheshire PTC Community Inspirers to plan for dissemination.

## Interviews

13 Community Inspirers also participated in a semi-structured interview in February 2023. Themes for the interviews were developed with research collaborators to ensure that the key discussion points were derived from the perspective of those with lived experience of poverty and reflected the priorities of the group (Simpson Reeves et al., 2020). Questions were based around these themes, including their experiences before the 2022–2023 cost-of-living crisis, media and political crisis framings, navigating the social security system during the crisis, broader poverty narratives, and considerations of how to address poverty.

## Analysis

Researchers made detailed notes during the workshop, and interviews were audio-recorded. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019, 2022) was used to develop themes across the different forms of data. This form of thematic analysis places importance on the researcher's role in knowledge production, and allows for the researcher to 'be fully cognisant of the philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions informing' their analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 592). In line with the participatory approach, the Community Inspirers who participated in the research were also central to this reflective process and were invited to provide feedback on the development of themes as the analysis progressed.

Illustrative quotations from both the workshop and the semi-structured interviews have been included in the subsequent 'Findings' section. The quotations from the interviews have been attributed to individual Community Inspirers through the use of pseudonyms. In the case of the workshop, it is not possible to attribute quotations to individual Community Inspirers as it was not recorded. The quotations cited are derived from the research team's notes, which collected individual quotations that represented the collective agreement of the workshop group.

## Findings

Addressing the ignorance towards those experiencing a ceaseless cost-of-living *disaster* long before the current crisis emerged, this section examines data generated by the Community Inspirers in relation to representations of the cost-of-living crisis and the lived realities of chronic poverty. A central argument that threads through the findings is that political and media representations of the cost-of-living can be harmful because they do not reflect the lived experience of enduring poverty. This argument is explored through three core themes which are examined in turn in the sections that follow: how representations of crisis construct ignorance to the cost-of-living as a chronic *disaster*; the persistent policy and accountability failure ignored by representations of the cost-of-living as *crisis*; and the violent lived reality of poverty.

### *State-Crafted Ignorance to the Cost-of-Living Chronic Disaster*

First, in the Community Inspirer accounts, there was a palpable sense of imbalance between the intense narration attributed to the current acute crisis of the cost-of-living for others, and the routinely overlooked realities of those experiencing the cost-of-living as a chronic harm. The following collaborative workshop quote exemplifies this:

When it [the cost-of-living] started to affect people who had never been in poverty, they media-orient it. When other people start to experience it, it becomes something to be talked and thought about. It has been going on for *years* for us, and it's so much harder. It [the differential attention] has done my head in.

In challenge to the representations of the current crisis and zemiogenic ignorance fostered around the cost-of-living for the poorest, the data highlighted the persistent struggle to meet living costs as a normalised feature of life, with or without a cost-of-living crisis. For those who endure chronic poverty and marginality, the cost-of-living is therefore not acute, new, or even a crisis. As expressed in the collaborative workshop:

For a lot of people, this is *not* a new thing, it's *not* a temporary thing like the word crisis suggests. It's a long-term thing that people can't escape from.

Indeed, for the most structurally vulnerable, rather than signifying a temporary moment of departure from normality that must be, for now, adapted to, being unable to afford basic necessities is a persistent fact of life. The outcome of a history of state infliction of harmful policies and conditions is the everyday routinisation and normalisation of deprivation, struggle and hardship. Furthermore, those living in entrenched poverty are disproportionately impacted by crises. The limited economic and social capital of this group intensifies vulnerability to deeper levels of destitution when a crisis hits within a disaster context, for example, a benefit downgrade. When a national cost-of-living crisis happens, the socio-economically disadvantaged suffer greater harm because low-income households spend the highest proportion of their budget on energy bills, housing, food and transport (De Silva, 2022). The intense narration of the cost-of-living crisis as new and temporary, further emphasises zemiological ignorance, causing those who have entrenched lived experience of poverty to feel further devalued.

Second, the theme of ignorance to the deeply embedded, structural nature of poverty was manifested in the Community Inspirers' perceptions of state and media prescribed responses to the current crisis. Reflecting the views of the workshop group, one Community Inspirer articulated:

We are a whole generation of people who have been forgotten; the crisis *isn't* about us, and the responses *aren't* for us.

The suggested media and political responses to the cost-of-living crisis tend to individualise responsibility by suggesting that individuals should change their circumstances and engage in personal sacrifice, to adapt to the constrained cost-of-living conditions. This includes shopping at cheaper shops, finding a new job with higher pay, reducing the use of central heating, and cutting out the consumption of luxuries. However, such "advice" negates structural barriers and vulnerabilities, inaccurately assuming that everybody has equal agency and access to such options. For many people living in chronic poverty, these "solutions" are not feasible, and these sacrifices are already routinely made. For example, Louise, a Community Inspirer with long-term mental health issues, expressed her anger at a news headline offering advice for dealing with the cost-of-living:

It said, if you're struggling so much to eat that you need to go to food banks, stop going on holidays and going to pubs. I *don't* go on holidays, I *don't* go to the pub, and I *still* need to use the foodbank.

Another disabled Community Inspirer, Amanda, explained the irrelevance of the suggested responses to her situation, owing to unavoidable disability-related costs:

My disability costs far exceed what I get in benefits, for example, I may need to get taxis, petrol in the car. . . I have extra washing, I have higher energy consumption because I have more electrical appliances related to my disability, I have the heating on more regularly because I have poor circulation.

Despite these essential costs becoming increasingly difficult to meet, Amanda expressed a feeling of helplessness due to a lack of feasible alternative options available to her due to her disability:

I have had a disability since birth. I've not been able to work at all. . . so, I've been on benefits all my life. I've found that I've lived in poverty because there's no escape. They say go out, get more hours, get a better job, but what do I do? And that's what all the government advice is, *go and get a better job*, but what if you *can't* work? There's no way to improve themselves or better themselves. . . you're constantly stuck in that poverty trap because there is no way out for you. It's not just a crisis, like you're on this particular contract or that, and it will end – this is going to be for *life* and that's quite difficult.

The prescribed responses to the cost-of-living deflect away from the need for deep-rooted structural solutions and, instead, frame poverty as a condition to be accepted and endured, and at best, mitigated, by individual behaviours (Hennigan and Purser, 2021). The neoliberal directive to become a 'crafty consumer', who cuts spending, curtails unnecessary consumption and embraces thrift as the means for improving their conditions, deflects responsibility back onto individuals whose material circumstances, in reality, are produced and constrained by larger structural forces (Hennigan and Purser, 2021: 389). In this context, political and media narratives aim to shape the broader public's understanding of poverty, distorting and individualising its causes and solutions, with the effect of perpetuating division and discord within communities. Through this process of zemiological ignorance construction, the everyday realities of individuals enduring prolonged experiences of poverty are misrepresented and hidden.

Third, ignorance can be observed through the unifying narrative of crisis and sacrifice dominant in political and media representations, which obfuscates that the extent and harms of sacrifice are differential and structurally patterned. Community Inspirers collectively identified that while some groups in society are scaling back on general wants in the current moment, people experiencing *chronic* poverty are living without necessities fundamental for wellbeing:

Some people are cutting back on restaurants, others are already cutting back on *eating*.

It's not a crisis for everyone. Most people will have some change, or a general want they go without, but for some of us, this is an *emergency* because the struggle and hardship are *so* severe.

Hence, the data revealed that expectations of further sacrifice in dominant state and media narratives (see Blake, 2022; Joy, 2022) are impossible for those experiencing chronic poverty, because they are already existing with the bare-bones of essential items or less, budgeting '*every single penny, right down to the last penny*' (Louise):

They don't realise, people in poverty *don't* have holidays, they *don't* have nights out, they've *literally* got to the point where there's *nothing* to cut out. They *don't* buy clothing. They look at their benefits *every* month and they're just thinking, well, that's been paid and that's been paid. . . You have to *seriously* look and work out *every single* day, and if an unexpected cost comes up like you've got to get a bus, that's actually coming out of your food budget. (Louise)

I *can't* sacrifice any more.

But for us it's not cutting back, it's cutting *away*.

I live on a shoestring. They assume I have luxuries, but I can't cut down – it's not possible – I am already cut down *to the bone*. It's my heating, it's my health.

What would they like us to sacrifice? You can't sacrifice *nothing*.

Within these discussions, attention focused on the way people in poverty are already negotiating the risks of living without access to affordable food, for example:

In the care home [where I work], staff eat leftovers off people's plates because needs must – there is no other option. (Gareth)

We've gone a day or days without eating. It's happened to us. It's not a new thing. It's taken a long time to have such extreme effects that people can't eat – it's not a *new* thing, not a *crisis*.

The research findings therefore illustrate the chronic, structurally embedded struggles of poverty, which are routinely normalised and ignored, in favour of narratives that highlight short-term, new issues or acute crises.

### *The Cost-of-Living Scandal and the Attribution of Accountability for Failure*

The second interconnected core theme is the role of a persistently scandalous policy and accountability failure in causing the long-term cost-of-living disaster. The data revealed that this reality is ignored, in favour of the inaccurately labelled cost-of-living *crisis*. For the Community Inspirers, the term “crisis” was merely a ‘buzzword’, obfuscating the longevity of policy failure and fault, by framing the current situation as a randomly occurring, temporary aberration to an otherwise steady state of affairs:

Crisis seems like it is not someone's fault, it's out the blue, uncontrollable, just happened.

Alternatively, the term ‘scandal’ was collectively identified as a more appropriate term to describe the ongoing and currently amplified pressures on living costs. This was illustrated in the collaborative workshop, where the group told us:

Scandal is better than crisis because it suggests it shouldn't be happening, that lots of problems and faults are coming to light – something that has been there in the darkness is now coming into the light.

Unlike “crisis”, which suggests a standalone event with nobody at fault, “scandal” was seen to better imply connotations of blame and accountability, and the deliberate concealment of the truth. Collectively, Community Inspirers considered the marked socio-economic inequalities characterising the country, and contemplated on the morality of poverty, reiterating the underlying notion of scandal. They therefore advocated for such narratives to change, and instead reflect the long-term reality faced by those experiencing entrenched poverty. Furthermore, the Community Inspirers recommended for a shift in media focus, moving from framing the problems surrounding the cost-of-living as a *temporary* crisis that seemingly emerged out of nowhere, to exposing the *scandalous* nature and disastrous structural harm of entrenched poverty in Britain.

Moreover, changing welfare policies in light of the crisis were described by Community Inspirers as temporary and ineffective fixes, often resulting in scandals that do not resolve the chronic cost-of-living for them:

This [entrenched poverty for the most vulnerable] has been going on for a long time but all they talk about is temporary *fixes*.

Each “fix” becomes a new scandal, one after the next.

Indeed, a key theme emerging among the Community Inspirers’ responses was that government “solutions” to the current climate, such as temporary benefit uplifts, cost-of-living one-off payments or energy help schemes, merely represent ‘sticking plasters’ that do not tackle the root causes of the issue, nor recognise or resolve the enduring struggles of those in poverty.

Crucially, underpinning the narrative of scandal was the dearth of accountability from those in Government. Neoliberal governance over the past four decades has entailed an enduring cycle of economic and policy decisions, persistently failing the most socio-economically and structurally vulnerable, and contributing to longstanding harms. Frequently, these cycles feature scandals that emerge into public view momentarily, but they are persistently characterised by a lack of accountability for those responsible. For example, during her time as Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Esther McVey described Universal Credit as a success, despite mounting evidence of its harmful impact (see Butler, 2018), yet there were no repercussions for this policy failure. As the collective workshop discussions revealed:

It’s a scandal that people make decisions, get paid, it goes wrong, and they move to a new department.

They don’t think of the effect of the decision; when it goes wrong, it costs lives.

This reflects the highly disproportionate burden, risks and costs at stake for the most vulnerable when policy decisions are made by those in power, who can distance themselves from the harm that ensues, owing to their status and perceived value, compared with those affected.

### *Institutional Violence, Stigma and Chronic Harm*

Third, countering zemiogenic ignorance, the data drew focus to key elements of the ongoing structural violence inflicted on those living in poverty by ongoing neoliberal-driven mechanisms of the social security system. Neoliberal and austerity-driven welfare policies, and the enduring degradation, poverty and hardship that they perpetuate, can be seen to constitute a form of ‘institutional violence’, implemented by the state in a ‘slow, deteriorative process’, intended to gradually grind vulnerable people down so that they no longer have the energy to fight (Cooper and Whyte, 2017: 23). Underpinning the chronic cost-of-living disaster, institutional violence is enacted through the inaccessibility, conditionality, punitiveness and denial of dignity that characterises the present-day social security system, justified by stigma and *causing* further stigmatisation (Evans, 2022a). Indeed, rather than being a safety net to support vulnerable people, the findings demonstrate that it degrades and leads to the chronic deterioration of financial, physical, and mental wellbeing, and the depletion of hope.

The institutional stigma characterising the social security system can be seen to permeate every aspect of the process of claiming benefits, from its design and accessibility to the implementation of welfare policies through conditionality. Many Community Inspirers reflected on the lack of accessible information about eligibility, the difficulty of applying for benefits and the doubt over whether a claim will be accepted, with one co-researcher describing the system as a ‘Pandora’s box with a secret code’ owing to it being deliberately confusing and inaccessible. Another identified a

deliberate double standard within the system, where claimants are subject to intense surveillance to monitor the amount being *paid out* in benefits and crack down on potential fraud via National Insurance records, yet the same records are not used to ensure those who are *entitled* to benefits get access to this information, meaning many benefits go unclaimed by those in need (Walker, 2024).

The arguably deliberate deterrence in the design of the benefits system can be exemplified by the 50-page long application for Personal Independence Payment, described by several disabled co-researchers as a ‘horrendous’ process. The Community Inspirers’ experiences suggested that the process of being considered eligible for support has become more difficult; the system was described as riddled with ‘deliberate roadblocks’ designed to test claimants and question their deservingness. Furthermore, this was described in the workshop as a degrading process, where in exchange for a basic level of help, one must endure continuous intrusion and surveillance:

There’s no dignity in getting what you are entitled to – you have to tell them where *every* bit of your money is going.

This theme of dignity being stripped away by the social security system was echoed by many:

Asking for help is always about “proving it”, and that’s undignified.

Furthermore, the workshop revealed notion that the system’s design is based on stigmatising assumptions about undeserving and fraudulent claimants:

You have to *fight* for every benefit. The system of trying to claim benefits is set up to try and catch people out.

The administrative hurdles and denial of dignity involved in accessing benefits and proving eligibility became especially clear in one co-researcher’s account of her ‘fight’ to claim an independent income after fleeing domestic violence. Louise’s abusive ex-partner was claiming disability and carer’s benefits in her name, and had destroyed all of the documentation she needed to prove her identity to access the benefits that were rightfully hers. The administrative barriers and delays in the system, including the long and rigorous applications and assessment process, meant that Louise could not access an independent income for almost two years:

It was all, you’ve got no paperwork, you’ve got no proof. Everything was a fight.

Such delays resulted in chronic hunger and deprivation; for instance, while between domestic violence shelters, Louise recalled not eating for four days, causing her to even consider returning to her abusive relationship for financial support:

When you’re going through that much hardship. . . even though you know it’s a death sentence, it does cross your mind.

When she was eventually awarded Personal Independence Payment, she was placed in the lowest category of support, lower than she had been granted previously, and had to appeal this decision, yet her benefit was not backdated for the time she had spent without an income.

The need to continually fight the system to be considered deserving of even basic support was echoed in the experiences of several disabled co-researchers who rely on these benefits as a ‘life-line’. Amanda, whose disability is lifelong, described claiming disability benefits as ‘a nightmare’,

especially considering the recent shifts to disability benefits. During and post-austerity, disabled people are subject to more stringent demands to prove their eligibility through rigorous application forms and assessments, and existing disabled claimants have been forced to reapply to have their entitlement reassessed (Ryan, 2019). For example, despite having been granted an “award for life” guarantee on Disability Living Allowance, one Community Inspirer described being forced to reapply and be reassessed when the benefit switched to Personal Independence Payment, and they will have to routinely repeat this process of having their deservingness scrutinised. This chronic sense of powerlessness and uncertainty was reflected by another disabled Community Inspirer, Gareth, who expressed:

It's always in the back of mind where things are gonna come to [an end]. . . they can call me in any time and you have to go through all the process again, and I'm worried about. . . it's that long-term thing. . . you'd be back to square one trying to fight for the bills, getting less money.

Despite being in a stable position currently with his benefit entitlement, Gareth and other Community Inspirers live in fear about having to undergo the process of applying and being reassessed, and potentially having financial support denied or downgraded. Reflecting further on the notion of “scandal”, the findings revealed a recurring lived experience of perpetual insecurity and harm because of ongoing changes to the social security system. This is summarised in the following workshop quote:

You can't guarantee what you will have; you constantly live with uncertainty trying to get by, and then new policies come along that put another foot on your head.

Hence, the findings showed the social security system as posing inherent risks for the most vulnerable: the risk of being denied access to a basic income, the risk of having one's deservingness questioned and routinely re-evaluated, and the risk of questioning a decision on eligibility for fear of a negative outcome. In response, the findings suggested that many avoid and mitigate such risks by not questioning decisions to downgrade their benefit eligibility following reassessment, but this comes at the cost of added persistent financial hardship, exemplifying the enduring power imbalances between those who design policies and those who are vulnerable to their effects.

Violence can also be seen in the state-enforced destitution that accompanies reliance on benefits, where they enable recipients to ‘*exist*’ and ‘*struggle*’, but ‘*not to live*’:

It's keeping me below the poverty line. Like obviously, I don't expect benefits to help me lead a life of luxury, but I want to not be stressing all the time, and the benefits system doesn't do that. (Jodie)

The long-term experience of insecurity was widely expressed, and the impacts of this are shared in the following collective workshop quote:

Money is a mental health issue. Facing *not* having money is hard; it takes its toll.

This everyday, grinding struggle of poverty was summarised by Louise:

You're walking around the shops . . . and you're looking and hoping there's stuff that's reduced. You feel *belittled* by it, because you know that you're not the only person, but you feel like it's just *you*, and it can cause so many mental health problems 'cos you're anxious, it's depressing, and watching your bank account, when the money goes in, just . . . once you've paid your bills . . . and you're looking and thinking, well, how am I gonna pay for food for the next month? And so, you're then trynna say, well, I could have £1 for meals for that day.

The data revealed that these institutionally embedded barriers to support and financial security for vulnerable people have ongoing and far-reaching consequences in terms of health and wellbeing. The harms inflicted go beyond the violence of enforced poverty; they lead to the internalisation of stigma, mental distress, deaths and suicides (Grover, 2019; Mills, 2018). As one Community Inspirer, Lee, reflected:

The real costs of this are not just destitution, they are *death* at the end of the day.

Lee discussed his experiences of living in temporary accommodation while battling with suicidal thoughts, and described the deaths of six fellow residents within a short period:

They weren't getting any food, their mental health goes down, their physical health goes down . . . they just give up and their mental health goes too bad, and it's a drug overdose, suicide attempts, their general life going down.

These deaths can be understood as "social murder" of the most vulnerable (Engels, 2009 [1845]; Grover, 2019; Mills, 2018), via a system that, in name, ought to support people's welfare, but in practice, knowingly causes enduring misery, worsened mental ill-health, starvation and even death, for those who are considered to have the least social value. Social murder was further demonstrated by a retired co-researcher, Valerie, whose husband died while waiting to hear about an appeal over a benefit decision declaring him "fit-for-work", and therefore undeserving of financial support, after suffering major health problems. Valerie recalled how the stress of the undignified appeals process contributed to his death, explaining:

We fought and fought and fought, went to tribunal . . . and the day of his funeral I get a letter saying he'd been accepted for his benefits, and we had spent two years nearly, *fighting* to get the benefits. It took away all his dignity and who he was. It took away *him*. He gave up because he couldn't struggle to get the help he needed anymore. It's *still* happening. We are told to prove it; prove you need it. This is *still* costing lives.

The overturning of benefit decisions following appeal is not unusual; the majority of decisions denying people the right to security are later overturned following the gruelling appeals process, often without additional evidence (Chaplain, 2024; Ministry of Justice, 2024), epitomising the needlessly cruel and arbitrary nature of such decisions, and the stress and inhumanity that they inflict on already vulnerable and unwell people. The language of fighting and struggle was central within the Community Inspirers' accounts of navigating a hostile and degrading social security system, reflecting the continual need to endure and resist the violence imposed on them. The accumulation of persistent struggle was found to contribute to the slow deterioration of hope, self-worth and ability to fight. The co-researchers summed this up by saying, 'the system wears you down'; 'the most vulnerable have got no fight left in them'. Consequently, owing to chronic experiences of structural violence, many found it difficult feel a sense of hope for the future and felt powerless.

## Conclusion

The current narration of the cost-of-living as only an acute crisis has been shown to reflect and reinforce the construction of zemiological ignorance towards the chronic cost-of-living *disaster* faced by those in poverty. Like other neoliberal crises that have come before, the cost-of-living crisis is presented as a short-term, exceptional moment of sacrifice and struggle that we must all endure. However, the narrative of crisis and the prescribed solutions, render chronic disastrous harm invisible, and the structural roots of such harm unnoticed. Utilising and interweaving the



theoretical frameworks of agnotology and zemiology, this article has critically exposed and explored the unheard accounts of people with chronic experiences of poverty in the context of a national cost-of-living crisis.

Findings revealed that for some, the cost-of-living is in no way a *new* problem. Rather, it is an enduring and normalised feature of life. The sacrifices and choices prescribed to cope with increased living costs are inappropriate for those unable to change their conditions, often due to mental and physical health issues, and the lifelong sacrifices of people living ‘down to the bone’. In contrast to the temporaneous narration of crisis, there exists a feeling of being ‘trapped’ and ‘stuck’ in a state of *chronic* hardship with no way out and nothing left to cut back on. The jarring disparity between the newsworthiness of the new cost-of-living crisis, versus the ignorance generated to the ongoing perils of the poorest, arguably reflects the chronic devaluation and stigmatisation of those in poverty. Use of the term “crisis” to describe the cost-of-living was considered inaccurate for many because it positions the current pressures as temporary, randomly occurring, and nobody’s fault. This jarred with the chronic lived reality of the cost-of-living, owing to a persistent, scandalous policy and accountability failure. Addressing the enduring ignorance to the realities of chronic poverty, the findings show the dire consequences of repeated institutional violence inflicted on the most vulnerable through persistent and punitive welfare retrenchment and reform.

Overall, the research revealed a conglomeration of chronic disastrous harm prevented from gaining public attention, largely through tools of ignorance inducement and devaluation of victims. The findings presented contribute to knowledge about the concealment of enduring poverty in the current context of the latest British crisis in a period of neoliberal governance. Drawing on the invaluable expertise borne from the Community Inspirers’ direct experiences of poverty, the article builds on knowledge about the longevity of suffering, deprivation and hardship, and the unseen and excluded reality of the violence of the cost-of-living *chronic disaster*. It highlights the importance of reframing the cost-of-living crisis, challenging ignorance through hearing and amplifying the voices of those experiencing entrenched poverty, both in the present moment of acute crisis, and against the enduring context of systemic structural inequality. Furthermore, this research contributes to knowledge about the ideological mobilisation of “crisis” narratives, illustrating the value of utilising and interconnecting the concepts of zemiology and agnotology in this analysis. This theoretical framework has enabled a critical examination of the enduring concealment and misrepresentation of working class struggle, alongside the harms inflicted on this group during the neoliberal era through deliberate policy decisions. Through the lenses of agnotology and zemiology, and drawing on the vital perspectives of people with lived experiences of these hidden struggles, the research has demonstrated how narratives of *crisis* have functioned to obfuscate the *chronic disaster* of poverty. It is hoped that this theoretical framing may prove fruitful for further critical sociological and social policy research addressing and critiquing state narratives and social harms in the contemporary era.

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## ORCID iD

Kim Ross  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8048-2382>

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