



**The Young  
Foundation**

# **A historical perspective**

**Michael Young's legacy and  
the work of the Institute for  
Community Studies**

By Holly Smith

## The Institute for Community Studies has held a vital role in the development of social research and public policy in Britain for 70 years.

Its legacy is defined by its focus on the everyday lives, voices, and concerns of ordinary people. The Institute has had a profound impact on the contours of the welfare state, the social sciences, and political thinking since its inception. In a contemporary context, an awareness of its complex history, and of the legacy of its founder Michael Young, are crucial to The Young Foundation's methodologies, and to the future of community studies.

### 1. The establishment of the Institute of Community Studies

Michael Young (1915-2002) is the central figure in the history of the Institute and of his eponymously titled organisation, The Young Foundation.

Born in Manchester, he studied at Dartington Hall's newly established progressive school, then at the London School of Economics (LSE). This leading college in the social sciences was set up by the Victorian social reformers Beatrice and Sidney Webb, and shaped under the influence of William Beveridge as Director from 1919 to 1937, before his authorship of *Social Insurance and Allied Services* in 1942 (Halsey, 2004).

When Young was still in his 20s, during the Second World War, he became Director of the Political and Economic Planning (PEP) thinktank. He was then appointed as the Head of Research for the Labour Party, where he was pivotal to the drafting of their seismically popular 1945 manifesto: *Let Us Face The Future*. Young, however, left in 1951, disillusioned with what he perceived as an intellectual drought within the party. He felt, very particularly, that Parliament could not act as the sole battleground for political reform (Campsie, 2016: 92, 109).

Young immersed himself in academic work. He went back to the LSE to pursue a PhD in social policy, with the thesis title 'A study of the extended family in East London', under the supervision of Richard Titmuss. Galvanised by this period of study, Young founded the Institute of Community Studies in 1953 as a research Institute that sought – as explained in the blurb featured in all its publications – 'to bring some of the strengths of anthropology to sociology, combining personal observations and illustration with statistical analysis [...] and to publish the findings in a form which will interest the layman as well as the specialist'.

The Institute's primary objective was to explore new ideas about socialism and kinship, emerging from Young's dissatisfaction with what he considered to be a narrowness in the Labour Party's political vision, and the themes arising in his doctoral research.

The Institute was founded in Bethnal Green (the locality upon which his dissertation was based) and remained there until 2020. It received funding support from the Nuffield Foundation and the American Ford Foundation (Tiratsoo and Clapton, 2001). A host of important figures would become involved in the Institute's steering and research, including but not limited to: Richard Titmuss, Peter Townsend, Peter Willmott, Raphael Samuel, Charles Madge, Edward Shils, Peter Hall, and Sir Alexander Carr Saunders.



Image of Dartington Hall.  
Credit: iStock.com/Zoblinski

## 2. The mission

The Institute of Community Studies was established at a time of enormous change in Britain. Still reeling from the Second World War, the nation was coming to terms with a new social landscape. The Institute was a hive of zealous young researchers, who were eager to understand how society was metamorphosing and in particular dialogue with the expansion of the welfare state.

At the centre of the Institute's mission was a commitment to joining up academic debates and social practice. Michael Young felt that 'man's deepest needs' were not being addressed in public policy (quoted in Campsie, 2016: 117). The Institute mooted itself, in contrast, as a research organisation that placed an emphasis on the 'detail of people's lives', which it considered essential for the development of appropriate, responsible social policy (Willmott, 1985: 140). The Institute's approach involved going directly into communities, listening to people speaking about their own experiences, and reporting their findings in accessible, punchy, and lively books for the general reader.

Michael Young was part of an intellectual milieu that was highly interested in 'everyday life' – both as an academic category and as the basis for left-wing political strategy – populated by exciting thinkers and projects across the 1930s to the 1950s (Highmore, 2001). This thinking about 'everyday life' coalesced around the basis that 'socialism would only prosper if it paid due respect to the idiosyncratic habits of ordinary people' (Campsie, 2016: 96). Mass Observation, an organisation which was founded to shine a light on the anthropology of 'everyday life' in 1937, was at the fulcrum of this. Its radical outlook served as a crucial, formative point of reference for the Institute. In fact, Charles Madge, one of the co-founders of Mass Observation, and a colleague of Young's at PEP, would go on to serve on the Institute's Board.

The Institute wanted to link up the fields of anthropology and sociology via a new approach to ethnographic fieldwork. It also wanted the Labour Party to move away from a strategy of courting the working class as *producers* – an approach they perceived as limited by its preoccupation with materialist concerns – to instead understand the more realistically diffused dynamics that characterised human society beyond strict economic stratifications.

In his book, *The Chipped White Cups of Dover: A Discussion of the Possibility of a New Progressive Party* (1960), Michael Young proposed that the Labour Party needed to respond to a society that was shaped, increasingly, by the forces of consumption, rather than production. He warned that a new party could attempt to step into the breach (Young, 1960). This contentious pamphlet was published by Unit 2. The Fabian Society refused to fund it.

Young wanted the Labour Party to recognise, embrace, and activate the 'solidaristic' elements of working-class community life. Young saw the family – and specifically the 'extended family' – as the fundamental unit of social organisation. In his eyes, it represented a key apparatus, which the Labour movement could instrumentalise as the foundation for a co-operative socialist society (Young, 1954). He was influenced by his PhD supervisor, Richard Titmuss, who was concerned with the social importance of the family (Titmuss, 1942; Titmuss, 1958), and by John Bowlby's child-parent 'attachment theory' (for early considerations of this, see Bowlby, 1951; Bowlby, 1958). This thinking about the family ran through the heart of the Institute's various early research projects.

The Institute attracted British left-wing thinkers in the 1950s, who were in favour of ideas of localised mutual support as a way to think more critically about the effects of state-led efforts of centralisation and nationalisation (Jackson, 2007: 188-191). Indeed, alongside the Institute, Michael Young went on to found the Mutual Aid Centre in 1977. Young wanted the Labour Party to get back to the neighbourhood (Young, 1948), and the Institute sought to analyse how the growth of an interventionist welfare state was impacting local communities in post-war British society. Its research was powered by a tenacious interrogative agenda: to understand 'whether the organs of the state were in cooperation or conflict with established patterns of family support and mutual aid' (Butler, 2015: 206). The Institute would spearhead a range of publications that sensitively and constructively appraised the successes and shortcomings of the Beveridgean welfare system. These texts rallied innovative proposals for its improvement to better suit the complex needs of people's everyday lives.

### 3. Research and publications

The Institute published wide-ranging and impactful studies from the 1950s to the 1970s. Their researchers' synthesis of direct quotation of ordinary people's stories, compelling prose, and thoughtful politically-minded commentary made for a number of bestselling books. Many would be republished in Pelican formats, the non-fiction classics so vital to Britain's mid-century 'paperback revolution' that forged a new reading public (Mandler, 2019). Freddy Foks – in his new study on the development of anthropology and sociology in 20th-century Britain – highlights that the emergence of this 'genre of anthropologically inflected community studies' contributed to the development of 'a new discourse of social change in post-war Britain' (Foks, 2023: 102). The Institute's publications served as a key lens through which both policymakers, academics, and the public came to recalibrate their understanding of post-war society in the face of its shifting sands. Methodologically, the Institute's researchers were pioneers in their authorship of ground-level, qualitative studies, which foregrounded lengthy, face-to-face interviews with ordinary people (Savage, 2010: 166).

In 1957, the Institute published its first book-length study: *Family and Kinship in East London*. This remains its most seminal text, estimated by 2019 to have sold half a million copies; an impressive figure for an academic book (Lawrence, 2019: 43). Authored by Michael Young and Peter Willmott, *Family and Kinship* built upon Young's doctoral research. It was an enormously influential text for sociologists, policymakers, social workers, architects, town planners, and the Britain's expanding post-war population of university students (Moran, 2012). Written when sociology, as a field, was still in its relative infancy (Halsey, 2004; Savage, 2010), *Family and Kinship* was repeatedly reprinted and 'arguably the most famous community study of all'; a book 'on which a whole generation of sociology students was weaned' (Newby, 1994: xi). It is still included as important preparatory reading for undergraduate social scientists on university reading lists.

*Family and Kinship* (1957) sought to digest what was happening in Britain's cities in the aftermath of the Blitz – to which central and local government were responding with a feat of unprecedented urban reconstruction (Bullock, 2002; Saumarez Smith, 2019). Aside from damage from bombing raids, much of the nation's surviving housing stock was ageing and unfit for sanitary habitation. Slum clearance was the order of the day, displacing millions of people to be rehoused in newly constructed estates, suburbs, and New Towns (Yelling, 2000), ushering in a new age of domestic modernity. The Institute, however, threw the meliorism of this housing drive into doubt. *Family and Kinship* (1957) contended that the squalor-ridden conditions in the slums of Bethnal Green had contributed towards the shaping of a uniquely communitarian and neighbourly way of life for its working-class residents. The slums were home to complex and deep-rooted 'extended family' networks, built upon matrilineal connections of interdependence and mutual support. This model of kinship, the book warned, was in danger of extinction in the face of slum clearance and dispersal to newly built neighbourhoods where people felt more atomised and isolated (Young and Willmott, 1957: xxviii-xxix).



Image of *Family and Kinship in East London* book cover.  
Credit: Penguin Books Ltd

The concerns that defined *Family and Kinship* (1957) were echoed in other social studies, such as John Mogey's study of Oxford (1956), Vere Hole's of Clydeside (1960), and Hilda Jennings' of Bristol (1962). This was an era of particular enthusiasm for muckraking analyses of slum neighbourhoods – not only in Britain but also across the Atlantic (Topalov, 2003). The distinctly nostalgic register of Young and Willmott's valorisation of 'traditional' working-class community life reflected a broader contemporary anxiety (particularly on the left) about its looming 'decline' in the face of consumerism, which were enduringly testified in lyrical works of non-fiction such as Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957) and Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* (1958). The Institute's later work on the new suburbs of Woodford and Dagenham – in Young and Willmott's *Family and Class in a London Suburb* (1960) and Willmott's *The Evolution of a Community* (1963) – would strike a slightly more optimistic note. Young and Willmott's findings suggested that matrilineal extended family networks might be able to tentatively endure in new neighbourhoods in the right circumstances (Young and Willmott, 1960; Willmott, 1963).

The Institute's work continued through the late 1950s to the early 1970s across an array of interwoven research subjects. After *Family and Kinship* (1957), the Institute brought out a succession of studies dealing with the theme of family life: Peter Townsend's *The Family Life of Old People: An inquiry in East London* (1957); Peter Marris's *Widows and their Families* (1958); Young and Willmott's *Family and Class in a London Suburb* (1960). These publications paid particular attention to the positionality of women as fundamental to the structures of social solidarity in communities, with which the Institute was so preoccupied. Indeed, an early title mooted for *Family and Kinship* (1957) was *Mothers and Daughters*. This concern with the female experience, and its interrelation with those of men, persisted throughout their work. It endured even in Young and Willmott's final double act, *The Symmetrical Family* (1973), which emphasised the importance of companionate marriage and the redistribution of domestic labour between husbands and wives.

The Institute's studies show a remarkable sensitivity to the challenges women faced in the post-war period. Michael Young was notable for his long-term concern for 'women's labour' (Dench, 1995: 179), and how he felt the Labour Party was failing half the British public. The Institute contended that the importance of women had been neglected as a result of the Labour movement's tendency to focus on proletarian workers in a strict industrial sense. The British welfare state needed to ensure it was not solely oriented around guaranteeing the social security of men as wage-earners and as the cornerstone of their families as patriarchs. This Beveridgean model left women precarious (Marris, 1957). Michael Young insisted that the wife was, 'in fact, the lowest paid, most exploited worker in the country, given a mere subsistence wage, with no limit on hours worked' (quoted in Butler, 2020: 95). Equally, however, the Institute highlighted that matrilineal networks had long constituted an alternative welfare state based on kinship bonds. The formal apparatus of the post-war welfare state needed to reflect, learn from, and integrate these older, more organic and decentralised forms of communitarian support, which were bound up in the 'extended family' for working-class people (Young and Willmott, 1957; Townsend, 1957; Marris, 1958; Young and Willmott, 1960).

The Institute argued that this was particularly important when thinking about the care and welfare of the elderly in public policy, a demographic who were especially reliant on practical familial support for their livelihoods (Townsend, 1957; Marris, 1958). In the early 1960s, the Institute developed an interrelated focus on public health, steered chiefly by its female researchers, publishing Enid Mills' *Living with Mental Illness: A study in East London* (1962) and Ann Cartwright's *Human Relations and Hospital Care* (1964). Cartwright went on to establish the Institute for Social Studies of Medical Care, for which Young was a sponsor. Young would also later be involved in the establishment of organisations working to facilitate patient advocacy – including the College of Health in 1983 and Healthline in 1986 – and for the enrichment of the lives of old people, with the University of the Third Age in 1982 and Grandparents Plus in 2001.

To lay readers, Michael Young is probably best known for popularising the use of the term 'meritocracy'. His entertaining book *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (1958) – an independently written work of creative fiction, rather than a sociological report by the Institute – was a dystopian satire about the problems of a society structured around value judgements of attainment. It presented 'merit-based' stratification as a deleterious social outcome, typified by England's grammar school system. The cynicism that underpinned Young's version of 'meritocracy' has often been missed by political commentators – including Tony Blair, who attracted censure from Young for his New Labour administration's uncritical championing of the concept. This led to an article in *The Guardian* subtitled: 'The man who coined the word four decades ago wishes Tony Blair would stop using it' (Young, 2001).

The Institute's research direction in the years directly after *The Rise of the Meritocracy's* publication reflected a shared burgeoning interest amongst its staff in education policy. The 1960s saw three Institute works around the subject: Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden, *Education and the Working Class* (1962); Michael Young, *Innovation and Research in Education* (1965); and Peter Willmott, *Adolescent Boys of East London* (1966). This work supplied important interventions on the contentious issues of the tripartite schooling system and the mercurial nature of 'social mobility'. Jackson and Marsden's social survey of schoolboys in Huddersfield showed that grammar schools continued to entrench inequality by drawing their 11+ intake chiefly from the middle classes (Jackson and Marsden, 1962). Peter Willmott's later deep-dive into the lives of teenage boys in Bethnal Green drew out the tensions and obstacles faced by young people – which were typically aggravated, rather than alleviated, by the rigid pipelining of children into grammar schools and secondary moderns (Willmott, 1966).

By the end of the 1960s, community studies were falling out of fashion (Stacey, 1969) and the 1970s saw a 'backlash' against sociology (Grimley, 2019). After the publication of *The Symmetrical Family* in 1973, the Institute's research output dropped off. Its researchers pursued other endeavours, informed by their apprenticeship at the Institute. Young was increasingly consumed with his ever-expanding clutch of associations, especially in the Social Science Research Council and around consumer activism (Butler, 2020: 187-216). Willmott was commissioned by the Department of the Environment to undertake research into inner cities, the developing debate about which he was closely involved during the 1970s (Saumarez Smith, 2016: 591).

The Institute re-emerged on the national scene at the turn of the century - not quite with a bang, but with a rather discordant clang. Michael Young returned to his thesis from *Family and Kinship* (1957) with a new text in 2006, co-authored with Geoff Dench and Kate Gavron: *The New East End: kinship, race and conflict*. It was a controversial book. The *New East End* (2006) looks at the new landscape of East London in a context of migration – from Bangladeshi immigrants, to students, to middle-class professionals – and how this was affecting tensions over housing in the surrounding locality. Contentiously, the book claimed that narratives of white working-class disadvantage were grounded, to some extent, in *fact* (Young, Dench, and Gavron, 2006: 4-8). '[I]t is understandable,' they argued, 'that many old Bethnal Greeners felt cheated out of the promised rewards for war service and, unsurprising, that some blamed migration for it' (Young, Dench, and Gavron, 2006: 4). 'It would be a misreading of the argument,' the authors continued, 'to believe that in giving a voice to the feeling of dissatisfaction among some white Londoners we are presenting a justification of racist and retrograde ideas, as some might allege. Hostility to people perceived as threatening, whether as sources of competition over scarce goods or simply as incomprehensible strangers, must be better understood before being written off as wicked or stupid' (Young, Dench, and Gavron, 2006: 8). However, the book's insistence that 'an approach concentrating on minorities alone is adding fuel to the fire' (Young, Dench, and Gavron, 2006: 8) attracted considerable censure: for its conceptual 'incoherence', 'empirical confusion', and analytically 'thin' treatment of housing policy (Moore, 2007: 381-383).

#### 4. Michael Young's interconnected projects and later life

In 2002, Michael Young died at the age of 86. His obituary in *The Guardian* described him as 'a towering figure in postwar social policymaking' (Dean, 2002). He had led a dazzlingly varied, influential, and 'polymathic' career (Butler, 2020: 16). After establishing the Institute, he was involved in the foundation of numerous important organisations – notably the Open University; the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC); Which?, the Consumers' Association; and the International Extension College. His ambidexterity was astounding. He possessed a sweep of interests and specialisms, reflected in his development of institutions ranging from the Research Institute for Disabled Consumers, to the Commuter Study Club, to the Association for the Social Study of Time, to the National Funerals College, to Language Line.

Young maintained a relationship with Dartington Hall, his former school, late into his life. This organisation was founded by Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst, about whom Young would write *The Elmhirsts of Dartington: The Creation Of A Utopian Community* (1982). It was home to an alternative, progressive approach to education that emphasised the importance of children's freedom and holistic development, free from the oppressions of disciplinarian and corporal punishment (Neima, 2022: 89). Its ethos shaped him, and is reflected in the Institute's work. The historian Anna Neima published two books covering Dartington Hall, on the basis of her PhD thesis: *The Utopians: Six Attempts to Build the Perfect Society* (2021), about six experimental community projects of which Dartington constitutes one chapter; and *Practical Utopia: The Many Lives of Dartington Hall* (2022), a more detailed academic monograph. Young was made Lord Young of Dartington in 1978. The two institutions of Dartington Hall and the Institute of Community Studies collaborated in the 1980s in a co-piloted project, the Dartington Institute of Community Studies, which sought to promote their shared values of community, self-help, and local enterprise.

Young's papers are now housed by the Churchill Archive Centre at Cambridge; he had been a fellow of Churchill College in the 1960s. They make up an extraordinarily detailed and colourful holding, in an extensive 383 archival boxes. The collection has been conscientiously catalogued and is accessible to public readers. The Churchill Archives also hold interlocking depositories relevant to the history of the Institute and The Young Foundation: the papers of Sasha Moorsom Young (an editor, radio producer, and writer who was married to Young and collaborated with him on various projects); the papers of Peter and Phyllis Willmott (the latter of whom was a prolific diarist); and the papers of Asa Briggs (an historian who wrote a biography of Young in 2001).



Image of the Churchill Archive Centre, Cambridge.  
Credit: Fractal Angel (cc-by-sa/2.0)

## 5. Thinking critically about the Institute's historic methodologies

The Institute and The Young Foundation have much to celebrate and draw upon from their rich shared history. However, it is also necessary to foster some carefully qualified reflexivity about the notable limitations of the Institute's early work. We can recognise the naivety of the Institute's historic methodological approaches and how its political positionality has shaped both its research agenda and its publications' conclusions.

In 1971, the first retrospective study on the Institute was published: Jennifer Platt's *Social Research in Bethnal Green*. Platt was incredibly cynical about the empirical shortcomings of the Institute's sociological work:



*The Institute of Community Studies is a phenomenon. It started on a modest scale [...] and in the 15 years since then has produced a continuous flow of books and papers and policy suggestions; its work has become probably more widely known in Britain than that of any other social research Institute, though judgements of its value have varied considerably. Some of its books seem to have influenced the whole outlook of many young people, and I suspect that the general reading public's conception of sociology is based largely on this body of work; academic sociologists, however, have often not been happy to accept this identification.*

Jennifer Platt, 1971: 1

The Institute's reliance on anecdotal evidence attracted criticism from newspaper reviewers from its inception. Most of its researchers weren't trained sociologists. Given the infancy of the discipline, such schooling was not commonplace in universities. Most of the Institute's employees worked on the hoof, learning as they went along (Butler, 2020: 110). Platt notes that important evidence would frequently be 'played down' in publications to affirm the Institute's pre-existing political stances (Platt, 1971: 17). Feminist scholars in the 1970s and 1980s would criticise the one-dimensionality of the Institute's romanticised 'Bethnal Green mum': a categorisation which they contended obfuscated as much as it revealed about working-class women's livelihoods (Steedman, 1986: 19; Wilson, 1980: 64-65).

While Young and Willmott retorted to Platt's critical text on the defensive, in a co-authored review for *New Society* (Briggs, 2001: 145), a new wave of historiographic scholarship has emerged in recent decades to offer a more extensive critique of the positivist elements of the Institute's early research. Scholars are now armed with details revealed by recently opened archives. Numerous historians have called the methodologies underpinning historic sociological research outputs from the post-war period into question, including and especially those of the Institute. (For an overview of the state of this lengthy and complex debate, see *Twentieth Century British History's* special issue roundtable of 2022). Historians have gone back to critically re-interrogate original interview transcripts and qualitative data collected by early community studies researchers to point out their methodological limitations. The legitimacy of the conclusions of their reports have accordingly been subject to reappraisal. This new crop of scholarship, which has been labelled 'the social scientific turn in modern British history', had an enormous impact on the historical discipline (Butler, 2022). It needs to be recognised and understood by present-day sociologists too, in order to create 'a critical, and historical, social science' with interdisciplinary awareness for the 21st century (Savage, 2022: 430).



Jon Lawrence's re-analysis of *Family and Kinship* is a particularly important example of this recent scholarship, and one that attends very specifically to the Institute (Lawrence, 2016). Lawrence's research into the archived notes and data from which the book was written levelled a seminal intervention. He found that Young and Willmott selectively cherry-picked interview data to include in their final publication to give a wilfully misleading representation of suburban malaise to romanticise contrasting styles of slum living, for which they had more affection. Lawrence insists: 'if *Family and Kinship in East London* was powerful politics, it was poor sociology' (Lawrence, 2016: 567). Young himself conceded that his depictions of working-class cohesion in the slums of Bethnal Green were over-emphasised: 'we probably did overdo it [...] in one respect or another, we were biased' (quoted in Lawrence, 2016: 592). The book has also been criticised for using too large an area for a tightly rigorous case study, suggesting its conclusions should be interpreted essentially as generalisations (Foks, 2016: 114). Indeed, in the first edition's introduction (which would be filleted out of later reprints), Richard Titmuss forewarned that he found the book to be 'impressionistic', rather than strictly empirical, in its approach (Titmuss, 'Foreword', in Young and Willmott, 1957).

Lise Butler is the foremost current scholar on Michael Young. Her recent acclaimed academic biography puts his legacy into fruitful dialogue with broader debates in social sciences and left-wing thought in British history (Butler, 2020). Butler has done extensive archival research, including into Young's collected personal papers, to pitch an important intervention about his research and the interlocking work of the Institute. She highlights how the Institute's championing of the 'extended family' was shaped primarily by Young's pre-existing political commitments; it was not an unexpected research finding of empirical fieldwork (Butler, 2015: 209). Butler sees the Institute as an 'explicit outlet for Young's frustrations about the Labour Party' (Butler, 2015: 210). She argues that the discipline of 'sociology provided a vehicle for political expression' for Young in his advocacy for a more mutualistic socialism (Butler, 2015: 210). Indeed, Peter Willmott publicly recognised (retrospectively) that the Institute acted with politics at the front and centre: the Institute wanted to influence policy (Willmott, 1985). Young also admitted, in discussion during the mid-1990s: 'I was taken in by the ease with which you can mix up the two words, socialism and sociology!' (quoted in Butler, 2020: 108).

Much of the Institute's work should be understood on this framework of a *priori* judgement, emanating from political commitments held by its researchers that preceded and shaped the way they conducted ground-level research. Freddy Foks encourages us to think connectively about the commercial and discursive success of these researchers' arguments in this context: 'despite these limitations, or perhaps precisely because community studies trucked in already available stereotypes, many community studies monographs were incredibly influential' (Foks, 2023: 104-105). Jennifer Platt's assessment sums up that '[o]ur total evaluation of the work of the Institute of Community Studies as a whole, then, must be one which rates its contribution to thought about planning and social welfare and to effective political pressure very highly, but which regards its direct contribution to sociology with considerable reservations.' (Platt, 1971: 143).

Much of the former research done by the Institute can, nevertheless, still offer scholarly fruit. Historians have gone back to the original archived interviews and field notes, which served as the basis for classic historic sociological studies by the likes of Michael Young, Peter Willmott, Raymond Firth, John Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, and Ray Pahl across the 1950s to the 1970s (Savage, 2005; Todd, 2008; Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 2018; Greenhalgh, 2018; Cowan, 2018; Lawrence, 2019). Roslyn Dubler has referred to this scholarship collectively as a 'historiography of the vernacular' (Dubler, 2022: 413). These original materials, which are frequently full of rich and meticulously recorded detail, can offer contemporary readers and policymakers a rare chance to get at the meat of how people expressed themselves and felt about their own lives. This kind of source is rarely available in institutional archives.

## A historical perspective on the work of the Institute for Community Studies and The Young Foundation

Scholars in the 21st century have re-analysed these documents to better understand the experience and development of phenomena of community, individualism, kinship, family, ageing, education, and public health in post-war Britain. From the Institute's prodigious historic work, we inherit an outstanding archive that affords us insights far beyond their formal published outputs. Their work captured and preserved a phenomenal seam of information about ordinary people's lives; these details have typically been lost to history. However, these archives need to be read carefully: both with an awareness of the influence of how the historic researcher has shaped the process of the interview; and of the ways in which their subjects' own views were bounded by subjectivity. The themes encountered (and reproduced too clumsily) in *The New East End* (2006) should encourage us to take particular account of this latter issue. As Jon Lawrence put it: 'The study of how people have narrated and reflected upon their own lives is crucial to social policy. The visceral sense of loss that drives stories about the decline of community needs to be understood, not least because it represents a powerful critique of the forces that threaten to atomise social life today. However, we should not mistake this sense of loss for an accurate description of how things used to be' (Lawrence, 2019: 2).

The political takeaways, moreover, from the work of the Institute and Michael Young can still give us strikingly relevant food for thought today. The Institute positioned social research as a vital keystone in policymaking during the 1960s. They were pioneers in taking profoundly seriously the variegated, complex, and sensitive needs of people by looking from the ground upwards. In this role, they have acted as an innovative and outspoken contributor to the welfare state's development in post-war British history. Their publications called for the development of a progressive political approach, which foregrounded the importance of decentralisation, local democracy, and user-centric social security. The *Renewal* journal called for research that is cognisant of historic examples of this exact type of advocacy, in order to formulate inspired and informed public policy in recent times (Ferretti, 2015; Brown and O'Neill, 2016; Campsie, 2017; Ellis, 2017). The Young Foundation stands at the helm of this approach in British research and policymaking today. Its rich intellectual heritage grants it a unique position from which to launch new proposals for tackling inequality in contemporary Britain.

*Image of Victoria Park Square, where the Institute, and later The Young Foundation, were based.*  
Credit: Julian Walker (Flickr)



## 6. The Young Foundation and the relaunch of the Institute

**In 2005, the Institute of Community Studies merged with the Mutual Aid Centre. This new organisation was renamed The Young Foundation.**

The Young Foundation supports locally-led social action and research, drawing inspiration from the expansive work of Michael Young across various sectors. Young's desire to understand social need in depth, as it was being experienced, is reflected in The Young Foundation's approach today. Its chief objective is to identify and reform the forces of structural inequality in Britain. The Young Foundation calls for effective policy change that responds to the real needs raised by people on the ground, generated through multi-disciplinary, partnership-based research. It seeks to promote peer research about communities and *with* communities. With this goal in mind, The Young Foundation relaunched the Institute as the Institute *for* Community Studies in 2019.

This newly regenerated Institute was christened with a new declarative report: *Safety in Numbers? A research agenda with communities, for communities* (2020). This publication presents a key milestone in the journey to test and evolve the Institute for Community Studies' model: its research agenda is based on co-creation between the Institute and local communities themselves. The Institute of today is galvanised by the former institution's radical approach of reaching directly into communities for the answers to policy debates, with a critical awareness of the necessity of learning from historic stumbling blocks. The new Institute has taken great steps forward. It has become a national pioneer of a collaborative, participatory peer research methodology for the 21st century.

The Institute spearheads innovative research 'with and for' people, mitigating the power imbalance between researcher and subject. Encouraging more equal relationships between institutions and communities, the Institute for Community Studies challenges traditional models of commissioning and research, supporting genuine partnerships to shape how knowledge is produced, how evidence is valued, and how policy is created. For policymakers, this approach supplies better data upon which to make informed decisions in government. For people on the ground, it lays the groundwork for activated, self-reflexive communities invested in their own wellbeing.

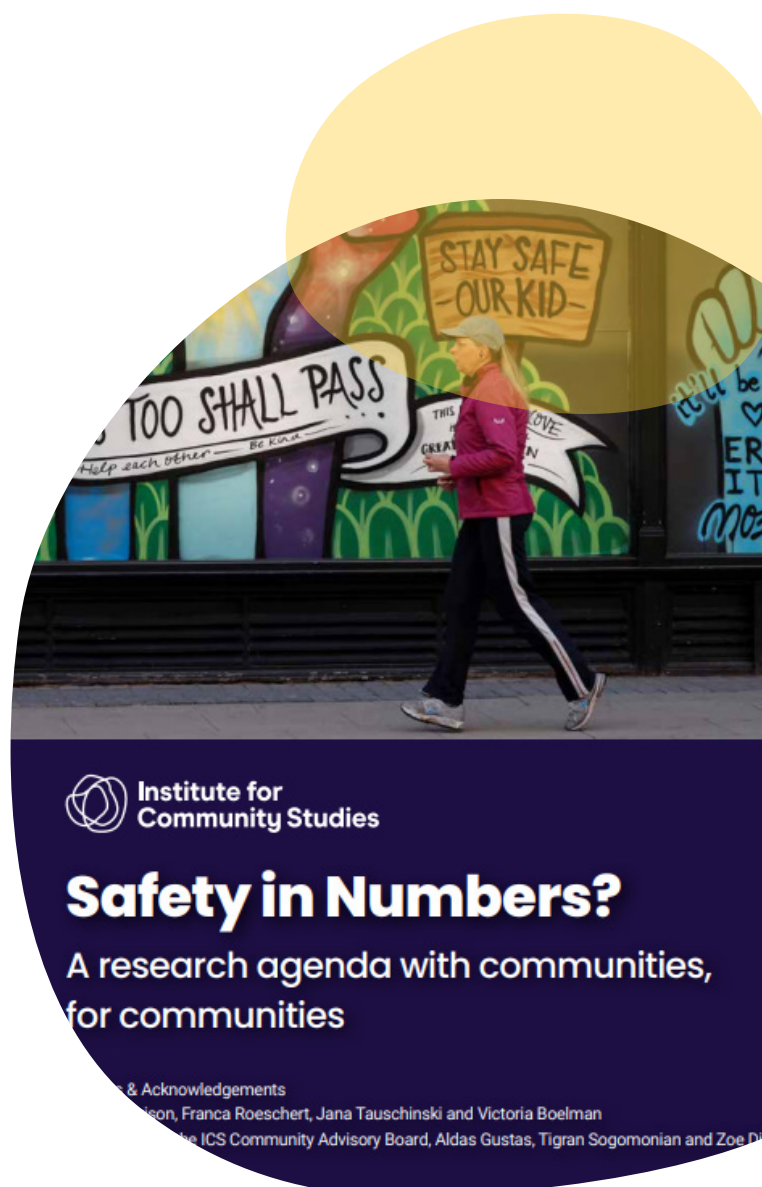


Image of the *Safety in Numbers?* report cover.  
Credit The Young Foundation

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