

The effects of COVID 19 on Children and Families living in poverty in the UK

Since the Coronavirus/Covid-19 pandemic caused by SARS-CoV-2 began in late 2019, the UK government, like many others, put public health measures such as social distancing and lockdown into place to reduce the spread of infection and prevent subsequent deaths. These measures took into effect during March of 2020. As a state of emergency was declared, panic ensued as the public began buying food and sanitary items in bulk to prepare for the upcoming unknown period. It very soon became evident that socio-economic status was a large determinant of how well people coped during the pandemic. In this report, we discuss how children and families living in poverty have been affected.

The lockdown rules stated that only people with what was considered essential jobs were allowed to continue working; those that were able to work from home were asked to do so, and public spaces such as restaurants and shops were closed. In addition, school children and university students were sent home to continue their education online.

To begin with, the panic buying meant that many were temporarily left without access to certain household items, and families from poorer backgrounds were unable to stock up on items as they could not afford to buy as much of what remained available. A report by the UK government stated that “Nearly six in ten families said they were struggling to cover the cost of three or more basic essentials, including food, utilities, rent, travel or child-related costs. Around half reported a new or worse debt problem.”.¹ A large number of people in higher earning roles that could not physically work from home were either put on the UK government’s furlough scheme, where they were compensated with up to 80% of their salaries. However, many shift workers, individuals working on zero-hour contracts lost their jobs.

A report by Child Poverty Action Group and Church of England that surveyed 678 low-income families with children between May and the end of November 2020, showed that approximately half of all the participants were finding it “very difficult” coping financially, while nearly a third found it “quite difficult” (Figure 1).² The results from this survey also showed that prior to the coronavirus, around two-thirds of the survey participants’ families had at least one adult in paid work; as a result of job losses by either one or both parents, the families faced a significant reduction in their earnings or income from self-employment, as a direct result of the pandemic.²

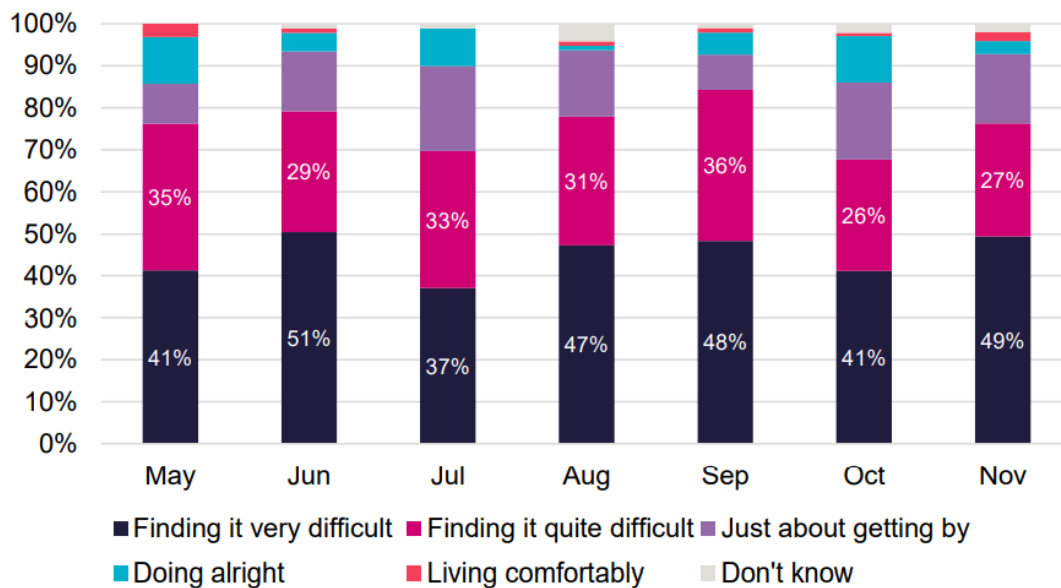


Figure 1. Chart adapted from Reference 2. Responses to “How well would you say you and your family are coping financially?”

Many charities run by volunteers were set up to try and help people in need. Among them were that delivered donated food packages to homes, made house calls to visit elderly, and to assist those going through mental or physical abuse. Access to healthy food and nutrition is of vital importance and poor nutrition has been shown to affect the health of people from poorer backgrounds, meaning that they are more prone to succumbing to illness.⁷⁻⁸ Preventable diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and obesity, which are highly prevalent in largely lower income communities, were identified early on in the pandemic as comorbidities of Covid-19.⁷⁻⁸ As a result, a large proportion of Covid-19 related deaths occurred in this group. Furthermore, children who receive school meals otherwise no longer had access to that extra meal, and parents were tasked with providing this. In addition, not all children and higher education students came from homes with sufficient electronic equipment and did not own laptops or desktop computers, let alone access to the internet. Some also lacked space and parental support to allow them to continue their schooling properly.

A report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) and Nuffield Foundation showed how the pandemic was impacting inequalities in education and skills and how this would create further inequalities in the labour market and future household incomes.⁵ To mitigate this, the report recommended that the government provide higher funding of remedial tuition for children from poorer backgrounds; along with other suggestions like extending the school

day or year; increasing use of technology in education (with equipment that could be provided to take home); and allocating more funding for vocational programmes and apprenticeships.⁵

When looking into the health and well-being of children during the pandemic, mental health was also considered. Public Health England did not report any significant changes in the overall mental health of children, stating that they were coping better than adults during the lockdown.⁶ However, this report clearly stated that it was difficult to conclude whether there was a correlation between poorer mental health and wellbeing among some children and young people over the pandemic and restrictions, as many parameter would need to be considered when comparing the two factors.⁶ However, the inability to assess the well-being of adolescents may be down to their lack of trust and sense of safety when voicing their feelings and opinions. Even though there have been numerous committees set up to debate policy around impact of COVID-19 on young people, with a focus on education, there was growing concern that young people's own voices would have been obscured by policy champions; so it was decided early on that surveys would focus on young people's accounts in order to establish a more realistic and accurate understanding of their experiences during the pandemic⁹

Another study that included a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire showed that adolescents with above-median mental health before the pandemic have experienced an increase in their emotional problems, conduct problems, hyperactivity, and peer relationship problems, but a decrease in their prosocial tendency during the pandemic.¹⁰ However, those with below-median mental health before the pandemic have experienced opposite changes. It concluded that the negative mental health impact is particularly prominent among adolescents in one-parent, one-child, and low-income households.¹⁰

The safety of people from low-income homes during the lockdowns was a huge cause for concern. A briefing by The Children's Society set out to outline the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people.³ It described that by March 2019, prior to the pandemic, 54% of children in need had abuse or neglect recorded as their primary need identified at assessment, equating to 215,730 children and young people identified as being at risk of abuse and neglect in the home.³ The report warned that domestic abuse cases would increase during the lockdown period.³ As families confined to their homes due to school closures and work from home settings, children and vulnerable adults became under more danger as they were no longer able to escape the abusive environments they were living in. The government later put rules in place to help assist victims of domestic abuse including

children and young people through effort to reopen schools and provide those under the child protection plan with a safe space away from abuse and neglect.³

With regards to adults, many investigations have been carried out over the course of the pandemic to assess the impact on them. Unlike children and young people, many adults faced difficulties coping with the changes. Among these changes, there were more reports of alcoholism, drug use and domestic violence particularly in lower income families.

Other studies have tried to investigate the effect of couples' changing work patterns in the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the changes in work organization due to either the loss of work and/or a switch towards working from home, the Understanding Society COVID-19 Survey (UK) analyzed longitudinal panels of 2186 couples to assess whether the pandemic had “elevated the importance of human capital vis-à-vis traditional gender specialization in shaping couples' work patterns” .¹¹ In this study, they found that the UK witnessed a notable increase in sole-worker families with the better-educated partner working, irrespective of gender.¹¹ Whilst families were able to sustain themselves on a single adult income, it is clear that socio-economic drivers on deciding which of the partners would become the primary bread winner, particularly in cases where both parents came from poor educational backgrounds, or did not out-earn each other.

Overall, we have tried to summarise in this report how the Covid-19 pandemic effected both children and adults living below the poverty line in the UK. Whilst Covid-19 remains very prevalent among the population, it is not yet possible to make overall conclusions about the full extent to which people from lower-income households have been impacted. We show how a number of factors such as nutrition, safety and access to amenities have contributed to making this sub-population either directly or indirectly vulnerable to the effects. Whilst many efforts have tried to address these problems, the pandemic continues to affect this group of people so it of the utmost importance that efforts to help remain in place, and policies around facilitating the wellbeing of children, young people and vulnerable adults are highly prioritised.

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