



THE SAFETY NET IS GONE

Understanding the impact of child poverty on the lives of children and families in England: a survey of social workers

August 2020



Executive summary

Over 4 million children were living in poverty in the UK prior to the Coronavirus pandemic. With mass unemployment sweeping the country, and the number of households making a new claim for universal credit (UC) surpassing 2.7 million,¹ this figure is expected to rise in the coming months.² Even without the devastating impact of the pandemic, child poverty rates in the UK were on course to reach 5 million by 2023/2024.³

To understand the impact of child poverty on the lives of children and families in England better, Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG), the Child Welfare Inequalities Project (CWIP), and the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) conducted a survey of social workers between January and March 2020 to ask them about the experiences of the families they work with. Although the views presented here were collected before the pandemic, the findings seem more relevant and urgent than ever. Social workers were asked about the prevalence and severity of poverty among the families they work with; changes to the social security system and cuts to services, and how these changes have affected families; and finally how poverty affects their ability to conduct effective social work with children and families.

Key findings

Prevalence and severity of poverty

Social workers told us that the vast majority of the families they work with are living in poverty. Families are experiencing food insecurity, homelessness, an inability to keep warm and stress associated with debt issues on a regular basis. Nearly all respondents (94 per cent) told us that the prevalence and severity of poverty experienced by families they work with has increased in recent years.

Impact on effective social work

Social workers reported that working effectively with families who are living in poverty is more challenging. Common experiences ranged from the practical challenges of families not being able to afford travel to appointments, or those posed by insecure work which makes it difficult to arrange or attend appointments, through to the emotional barriers arising from the stress experienced by parents facing financial strain trying to meet their children's needs with insufficient financial resources.

Impact of changes to the social security system

Social workers were asked about how changes to the social security system have affected the families they work with, for example cuts to benefit levels, the introduction of UC, and policies such as the two-child limit, the 'bedroom tax', and the benefit cap which disproportionately affect families with children. 78 per cent of respondents reported that over half of the families they worked with had been affected by these changes. The adequacy of benefit levels was a key issue raised by social workers.

¹ [Universal credit declarations \(claims\) and advances management information](#) (16 March – 23 June 2020) Department for Work and Pensions

² [1.1 million more people face poverty at end of 2020 as a result of coronavirus pandemic, finds IPPR](#) (June 2020) Institute for Public Policy Research

³ [Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK](#) (June 2017) Institute for Fiscal Studies

Impact of cuts to services for children and families

Social workers were asked about the impact of cuts to services for children and families on their work. Respondents overwhelmingly told us that the lack of support services in local communities had a negative impact on the families they work with, and led to situations escalating in severity as there was little scope for preventative work. Cuts to child and adolescent mental health services were most frequently cited by respondents, but children's centres, youth services, libraries and cuts to more preventative aspects of local authority children's services (e.g. early help) were also mentioned frequently by respondents.

Recommendations

1. The impact of poverty on the ability of families to support and protect children needs to be addressed across government departments, ideally as part of a cross-government child poverty strategy.
2. The impact of the cuts to local government on the ability of services to support children to be cared for safely within their families and communities must be urgently addressed through the provision of adequate funding to local government and other support services for children and families.

Introduction

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and researchers from the Child Welfare Inequalities Project (CWIP) developed a survey of social workers in order to better understand the impact of child poverty on the lives of children and families in England. The survey took place from January to March 2020. This exercise was supported by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS).

A total of 129 valid responses to the survey were received. Of the 129 responses, 117 were from social workers and 12 were from other professionals or individuals connected with the sector, including senior managers in children's services, a senior mental health practitioner, a volunteer and a retired manager. The majority of those who responded worked in a variety of roles and teams in local authorities. However, several independent or consultant social workers, as well as Cafcass staff, also contributed to the exercise.

There was a good geographical spread of responses across the nine regions of England, with particularly strong representation from the south west (25), south east (22) and Yorkshire and Humber (20). One response was received from Wales. Respondents had a range of experience: some were still engaged in training or were newly qualified while others had 20, 30 or even 40 years of experience.

Key findings

The survey contained a series of questions with plenty of space to provide additional narrative. Analysis of the responses found the following:

To what extent do you see the following factors affecting the lives and outcomes of the children, young people and families you work with?

- **Low income** - 98 per cent of 121 respondents said this was somewhat or very much an issue for the families they work with (87 per cent said very much)
- **Food insecurity** – 92 per cent of 124 respondents said this was somewhat or very much an issue for the families they worked with (63 per cent said very much)
- **Homelessness** – 95 per cent of 126 respondents said this was somewhat or very much an issue for the families they worked with (73 per cent said very much)
- **Inability to keep warm** – 80 per cent of 126 respondents said this was somewhat or very much an issue for the families they worked with (33 per cent said very much)
- **Debt stress** – 99 per cent of 127 respondents said this was somewhat or very much an issue for the families they worked with (81 per cent said very much).

Respondents were then asked to **briefly explain their answers and, if possible, give examples of how they saw these factors affecting children and families they work with.** A total of 124 respondents provided additional information here.

"I would say that at least 80 per cent of the children open to my team are in part impacted by poverty. Both in work and out of work poverty."

"Foodbanks are now seen as essential, and with the lack of s.17 monies available,⁴ more children are in homes which have to choose between heating and new clothes."

"Parents are struggling with benefits, particularly the wait for universal credit. This, along with food insecurity, impacts on their mental health and ability to care for their child. Housing is a huge issue; many houses are overcrowded and this leads to family stresses, and impacts again on families' mental health."

"Universal credit isn't enough to live on. I support care experienced young people. I was shocked to discover that universal credit as a sole source of income can mean young people don't pass some housing associations' financial assessments!"

"We have seen a definite increase in financial hardship and poor housing impacting on families. The rise in food and baby banks as well as children's social care having to give financial aid to families."

"To be honest I don't know where to start. Over the last 11 years I have worked in the same council as a social worker in a job I love. I have seen over those years how poverty has impacted on the children and families I work with increasingly as years go by... I would say low income and poverty is a feature of the majority of the cases I have worked on over the years with the exception of a handful of families."

"Increasingly so the families we work with are disadvantaged by factors outside of their control, oppressive benefit changes, difficulties getting suitable and safe housing. As a social worker I feel disempowered to support families, as we cannot support when the issues are caused at a societal level, we can signpost families to support services, but that does not remedy not having enough money via benefits or a landlord who is not prepared to rent to those in receipt of benefits."

Respondents were asked to **estimate the proportion of children and families they are working with who are affected by one or more of the factors listed above in a typical month.**

Almost three quarters (75 per cent) of the 126 responses received noted more than 50 per cent of their caseload featured families struggling with debt and poor housing, with 41 per cent stating this was the case across more than 75 per cent of their workload.

When asked if they have noticed **any change in the prevalence or severity of the factors mentioned above among the children and families worked with over the last few years**, 94 per cent of the 121 respondents to this question stated things were a little or a lot worse (73 per cent stated it was a lot worse); only 5 per cent reported no change. Examples of the changes were provided.

⁴ Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 states that it is the general duty of every local authority to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need; and so far as it is consistent with that duty, to promote the upbringing of such children by their families.

42 respondents, or just over a third, cited changes to the benefit system and UC, for example:

“Even in two years, the proportion of families with debts and rent arrears has increased. Families never have credit because they can’t afford it. Two years ago, only half of the families needed support with Christmas presents. Last Christmas, every family needed help with presents.”

“Less flexibility to be able to offer financial support to families. Much harsher sanctions and benefit caps are making life very challenging for already hard pressed families.”

“I am now a regular visitor to food banks. As a team we are accessing these weekly whereas before it may have been an infrequent occurrence. I also feel that sometimes other agencies contribute to the problems families face. I will refer here specifically to education, whereby I have worked with families who can barely afford food, bedding and clothing yet when they do their children experience sanctions at school for wearing the wrong shoes or clothing.”

“Families having greater difficulties accessing welfare benefits many are entitled to. Universal credit is a real problem for many.”

“More families are struggling to access benefits, there are long delays in waiting for decisions to be made for benefits to be paid pushing families further into poverty. Families are then making desperate choices such as payday loans which push them into further financial issues. I’m seeing more families being declined benefits for family members reducing their income further.”

“Families are reporting that benefits have been cut and difficulty navigating the applications for benefits and difficulty complying with the commitments expected by the Jobcentre.”

“The sanctions are so harsh that when families “slip up” with rent or miss a deadline the consequences of a 12 week sanction often leave them feeling there’s no point trying to repair the situation and plunge families into despair leaving them without hope. The biggest change I have noticed is this lack of hope and feeling of failure.”

“Bedroom tax, a rise in temporary accommodation that leads to families being housed at a distance from local schools.”

Social workers were then asked **if the cumulative impact (poverty, homelessness, unsuitable housing, food insecurity or financial/debt-related stress and worry) on families affected their ability to work with them effectively.** The examples provided included:

“It is hard to work with a family and support them to make meaningful and lasting change when their economic situation is going to remain the same. Sometimes we are able to pay off some debt or apply to a charity which will do this. However, the stress that some of our families are under is immense.”

“Yes - fear and anxiety permeate families involved with children’s services as support services are cut. Need is often seen as ‘risk’. Families are not able to attend contact or meetings because of lack of funds or precarious working conditions. [It is] really difficult for families subject to immigration control who do not know how their information will be used/shared with the Home Office.”

“Our families do not typically have any savings, and when transferred to universal credit they have a period of 5 weeks without an income, during this time they can take an advance payment. However, in practice this further disadvantages them as they then have to pay it back over at the longest 12 months,⁵ further financially disadvantaging them. This can mean families without food, or children not getting the basics such as appropriate clothing.”

“How do you support someone to learn to budget £55 a week in the face of utility bills to heat damp cold housing, rent top up, food costs, clothing, travel etc.?”

“Social services spend too much time on individual factors such as mental health and ignore things that make families worry. We are powerless to change structural issues such as housing quality, local employment opportunities or lack of money for basics.”

“Parents are scared to tell us their financial difficulties because they are worried it would be used against them (it wouldn't) but it increases their vulnerability and the stress. Parents are so focused on survival that doing work to address deeper rooted issues is so hard...how can they talk about parenting when their mind is always on how they will pay their rent or buy food or uniform or cover costs of a school trip?”

One social worker shared their experience of working in a local authority that had made poverty prevention and reduction central to their work, through a local poverty strategy and other measures, which was positively impacting on their work with children and families:

“We are fortunate as an authority that we do not ignore poverty as a significant issue for families and therefore tackling it is part of our children and young people plan and we have a tackling poverty strategy for the city... We also have an active group of social workers and managers across the city working together to better understand the best resources we can access and how to ensure we support families and not blame families. We have a child protection conference service that has a poverty awareness service plan. We want all parts of our service to be poverty aware and support families.”

Changes to the social security system: have these changes affected the families you work with?

As demonstrated above, respondents commented on changes to the social security system throughout their responses, however they were also asked directly about how these changes had affected families they work with. 78 per cent of the 118 respondents to the question noted more than half of the children and families they work with have been affected by these changes, including the introduction of universal credit (UC), sanctions, the benefit cap, the two-child limit and the introduction of the 'bedroom tax'. Of this number, 41 per cent reported more than three quarters of children and families were affected. Comments included:

“Universal credit is responsible for a LOT of it. Tax credits etc were tricky to understand but people mostly knew where they stood with it and could budget. Also giving housing benefit to claimants has resulted in a lot of mismanagement of income and budgets; a lot of people struggle to manage paperwork and budget theory in poverty as they live in "survival" mode and do not have "headspace" for planning and managing paperwork.”

⁵ In March 2020 the Department for Work and Pensions announced that claimants would be able to repay an advance over 24 months, however this change will not be implemented until October 2021.

“One of the very concerning impacts of these issues is the ability of women with children to leave abusive partners. I had one parent who left for about a year (her 7th time of trying) but was hit with the benefit cap. There was no financial support.”

“I regularly visit children whose parents are struggling to manage benefits. The introduction of things like the bedroom tax and universal credit have had a massive impact on families’ ability to afford basic care. Regularly families are sanctioned and left without money with little consideration as to how they will manage.”

“A large per cent of families I work with are no recourse to public funds. Out of those who do have recourse I have recently seen one baby become seriously ill due to damp in the families’ council housing. Since UC many families are struggling with the 5 week gap. They often ask for an advance but still incur rent arrears and further debt.”

“I work with care experienced young people who face many challenges in life and are often reliant on benefits while they complete their education or due to not being ready to enter the world of work at 18. These young people who are living independently really struggle to make ends meet in the face of rising bills, food and travel costs. A lot of support is needed to maintain benefits claims and sanctions are often applied. Other young people who are working are on zero-hours contracts or minimum wage.”

“I work with 18+ care leavers. IF they live in supported accommodation (i.e. a YMCA) the housing cost is so high that it offers no incentive to work due to the amount of money they have to contribute to their accommodation. Those living on £59 a week universal credit also struggle to manage. Those who have ended up in emergency accommodation struggle most of all on £59 a week due to lack of cooking facilities, service charge costs up to £12.50 a week and the cost of a mobile phone (even without a contract) in order to have internet access to apply for jobs etc, update their UC claim which has to be done on a computer and the cost of transport. Those who are single parents struggle to pay their basic bills. Private housing in [CITY] is extremely expensive and can limit options and aspirations.”

“This borough was one of the first areas where changes to state benefits were implemented and we have seen the significant impact of universal credit changes. [There have been] reports from voluntary sector organisations of increasing pressures and demands for support. Food banks, community centres and schools describe many situations of the increasing numbers of food and energy poverty in particular. Take up of Fit, Read and Feed services that our leisure services and community centres deliver in school holidays is exponential. [There are] many stories of children taking part hungry with food the main draw.”

“Young people are much worse off on universal credit. Start their adult life with no money!! Claiming on eighteenth birthday and not being paid for five weeks. What a start to adulthood!!”

“I have worked with many families with more than two children who are struggling due to the two-child limit as they have essentially had their benefits cut.”

“There has been a big impact on people from the policy of having to pay extra when a family has a spare bedroom in their house. This means if a child is removed from a parent’s care, there is pressure for the parent to move, impairing efforts to have the child returned to the parent's care.”

“First of all getting help from the Jobcentre is impossible, getting an appointment is even harder. Secondly, the rules are so strict and ridiculous that every family eventually gets penalised, often because of health problems. As an example, one father suffers anxiety which leaves him struggling to leave the house. He therefore finds it difficult to go to the GP and then doesn’t get his sick note signed (needed every 6 weeks) so he is then sanctioned which increases his stress and impacts his anxiety.”

“Families are expected to wait for long periods with no money before benefits are paid. Families are not offered adequate support around benefit entitlement – I discovered that a family had missed out on thousands of pounds of child disability benefits payments due to not being advised that they were entitled to this [extra financial support] having two disabled children!”

Cuts to services for children and families: how has this affected your work with children and families?

Social workers were asked how cuts to services for children and families, including schools, children’s centres, libraries, child and adolescent mental health services, and youth services have affected their work with children and families. Respondents frequently cited the loss of universal services from local communities – including libraries, youth services and children’s centres which are open to all – as detrimental along with a narrowing of the support available in schools. Many respondents reported that the lack of support services available led to situations escalating in severity as less preventative work is taking place with children and families.

The most frequently-raised issue was long waiting lists for, and the rationing of, child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). Comments include:

“CAMHS provision is the main issue with young people [who are] waiting up to 18 months for therapeutic intervention despite immediate and urgent need. [The] voluntary sector is also hugely impacted, waiting lists for survivors’ network (sexual abuse) and domestic abuse support services are both closed to referrals at present.”

“There are less resources for early intervention such as support groups for parents, leading to a higher level of children becoming subject to child protection plans and care proceedings. Waiting lists for children to see a mental health professional are very long leading to issues becoming more entrenched and difficult to address.”

“Schools are increasingly able to offer less, so children’s services are having to fill some of these gaps or respond when situations escalate to safeguarding concerns. The lack of preventative services is also having a huge impact.”

“We are unable as a partnership to offer some of the resources and support we previously had access to (e.g. universal youth opportunities significantly reduced, family support via children’s centres, pastoral support in schools, Homestart, breakfast clubs/extended schools provision, respite/short break for children with disabilities).”

“My local authority actually has really good early help services, in my view, so whilst some children’s centres have closed, the impact is likely to be less than elsewhere. A large number of libraries are run by volunteers which limits their activities and hours of opening, but again I still see programmes of value for children and families. The main impact of those changes is that people have to travel further, rural transport isn’t reliable enough to support attendance. Cuts to youth services have been significant and I think it highly likely that this has contributed to the number of teenagers in care, following family breakdown. Given the cost of placements, this was very short sighted.”

“Yes. It is no coincidence that we have more young people at risk of exploitation when virtually all the youth centres have closed and there are very few youth workers left. Vulnerable young people need youth workers not social workers most of the time.”

“The safety net, not just financially but in terms of a helpful professional that can support someone through a difficult part of their life, is gone. That means more casework that has to go straight to court.”

“Closure of libraries means disadvantaged young people struggle to complete homework as they don’t have computers or internet at home. Most of the young people are on the waiting list for CAMHS who are under increasing pressure, [they] close [cases] if the young person doesn’t immediately engage. The most troubled young people often don’t [engage]. Self harm is increasing and this means that services like the one I work for, are often crossing over onto areas such as mental health, which isn’t technically our remit. Young people often struggle more if their family is living in poverty, yet without social care involvement. One young man is living with parents with chronic addiction issues, risky adults coming to the house etc., yet the social services referral has been rejected.

“100 per cent. The loss of helpful services at a lower level has driven the rise in referrals to and intervention from statutory services like mine.”

“Yes. There are no longer children’s centres in [CITY], so children under 5 are invisible, all local authority youth provision has ended also. [Youth provision] is so needed with the current criminal exploitation of young children. We have a 2/3 year average wait time for children to be seen by CAMHS. This has all had a huge impact on the children and families in the city. On a positive note there has been the introduction of family hubs and early help, however the multi-agency element needs expanding.”

“The loss of sure start centres who could have much impact on early intervention, reducing social isolation, promoting early years’ positive health and community interaction is horrendous for families.”

Finally, respondents were asked for **any thoughts or comments not covered elsewhere:**

“The situation is dire. The more financial pressure families face the more stress they suffer and the less capacity there is for change. This means children are more likely to come into care. The reduction in preventative services means that difficulties are more engrained and families are in crisis and have more complex presenting problems. More difficult to make changes and so [children are] more likely to come into care. My case load is mostly child protection or proceedings, nothing is ever lower level.”

“It is really worrying that families have to navigate a system that is cumbersome and punitive moving into a system of the deserving and undeserving. Practitioners who want to support and work alongside families are under pressure to close interventions given caseload pressures.”

“It is shocking that children are being subjected to such poverty, which can have lifelong consequences impacting on mental and physical health, employment and opportunities. This is choice... poverty is not an accident.”

“In my 30 years of social work I have never seen families in such dire financial hardship as widespread as it is today. There is a sense that they are held responsible for the poverty they live in and being judged for this.”

"I don't know why we aren't up in arms as social workers about the social injustice the people we support are facing. It is so wrong. We know that there is a correlation between poverty and children being taken into care. The compassion within the system has GONE. [I was] shocked when I returned to frontline work and started liaison with housing etc again. 15 years ago we just had a chat with housing and benefits agency on phone and there was understanding! We would reach agreements and people wouldn't be threatened with eviction."

"Social work is about social justice. We can't ignore the devastating long term impact poverty has on children."

"As a social worker with years of experience I feel more and more that we are having less power to support vulnerable members of the society and feel that the welfare system who aids us to support is disappearing and often feel stuck and angry even though I feel I work in a very good and strong system, the wider; national and international systems are bound to impact the fabric of the profession I do, and I feel that we are pressurised to adapt to the changing system."

Conclusion and recommendations

This was a small study involving respondents who were self-selecting. However, it has shone a light on the human costs for children, young people and families of changes to the social security system, the associated growth in poverty and wider cuts to services for children and families. Moreover, the survey was undertaken prior to the Coronavirus crisis. Child Poverty Action Group, Child Welfare Inequalities Project, and Association of Directors of Children's Services are extremely concerned that the financial situation facing both families and local authorities has deteriorated rapidly in recent months and it is children and families on the lowest incomes who are bearing the brunt of the pandemic, which has laid bare the inequalities in our society.

Based on the responses, we offer the following recommendations for government:

The impact of poverty on the ability of families to support and protect children needs to be addressed across government departments, ideally as part of a cross-government child poverty strategy.

The families who become involved with children's social care are affected by a range of policies across government departments. They are often the most vulnerable families in society with disproportionate numbers in poverty. It is vital that policies introduced by one government department, such as benefit changes by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), are assessed and evaluated in terms of their implications for children's safety and wellbeing, with the Department for Education (DfE) playing a lead role in co-ordinating such exercises. Ideally, this should be undertaken as part of a cross-government child poverty strategy. England is the only country in the UK without such a strategy.

The impact of the cuts to local government on the ability of services to support children to be cared for safely within their families and communities must be urgently addressed through the provision of adequate funding to local government and other support services for children and families.

Year-on-year budget reductions in public spending over the last decade have intensified the difficulties facing vulnerable families while simultaneously reducing the support available to them to prevent a crisis. This has resulted in growing levels of child protection activity. The government must act quickly to address the £3.1 billion funding gap in children's services that the Local Government Association⁶ has estimated will exist by the end of the parliament (2024/25). There also needs to be a renewed commitment to preventative services for children, young people and families as part of a review of Section 17 of the Children Act (1989), and sustainable investment in preventative services. Future spending priorities need to be underpinned by a commitment to ensuring that support services for children and families are fully available and accessible within each local authority.

⁶ [Children's care cash crisis: nine in ten councils pushed into the red](#), (2019) Local Government Association

About CPAG

Child Poverty Action Group works on behalf of the more than one in four children in the UK growing up in poverty. It doesn't have to be like this. We use our understanding of what causes poverty and the impact it has on children's lives to campaign for policies that will prevent and solve poverty – for good. We provide training, advice and information to make sure hard-up families get the financial support they need. We also carry out high profile legal work to establish and protect families' rights.

About ADCS

The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd. (ADCS) is the national leadership organisation in England for directors of children's services (DCSs) under the provisions of the Children Act (2004). The DCS acts as a single point of leadership and accountability for services for children and young people in a local area, including children's social care and education.

About CWIP

The Child Welfare Inequalities Project (CWIP), 2014-19, aimed to establish child welfare inequalities as a core concept in policy making, practice and research in the UK and internationally. Key research tasks were to identify the scale of inequalities in social welfare intervention rates as they affect children in different places, of different ages and identities, and their families, and to begin to understand how different factors in family lives and service responses interact to produce inequalities. [Find out more about the research team and the work conducted.](#)

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