

The study

- In June 2020 15 parents and carers completed diaries and activities for Covid Realities.
- Covid Realities is research exploring daily life for low-income families during the pandemic.
- Covid Realities has also worked alongside other research teams, and with the Child Poverty Action Group. Full project details can be found at <https://covidrealities.org>

Key findings

- The pandemic is causing additional and often extreme hardship in families' lives.
- Daily essentials became more costly and less available, sharply raising household costs.
- People's mental health is suffering from both new and compounded strains.
- Financial, emotional, and social support are needed to navigate these additional barriers.
- Food provision is sometimes insufficient, creating feelings of guilt for parents and carers.
- The end of lockdown and the 'future' beyond looks highly uncertain for many.
- Future concerns centre on finding or retaining work, and on managing financial difficulties.
- The 'new normal' brings with it new costs that may heighten exclusion and inequalities.
- Policy responses have not firmly focused on the needs of families with dependent children.

We recommend

- An increase of £10 per child per week to Child Benefit.
- Embedding the perspectives of people on a low income in policy decisions and debates.

Introduction

COVID-19 will harden existing inequalities and create new ones. There is a pressing need to understand the experiences of families in poverty, who now face significant new challenges. The COVID Realities project aims to meet this need. Over twelve months, parents and carers who are managing on a tight budget will share their experiences in online diaries and activities. They will also steer policy-focused discussion groups. Here, we summarise diaries and responses to questions submitted by 15 parents and carers during June 2020.

Getting by during a pandemic

Parents and carers described how lockdown made their usual budgetary practices impossible. For example, visiting multiple supermarkets to find the best prices or buying unbranded goods:

"There are lots of empty spaces on the shelf so you have to grab what there is and some of those products you wouldn't usually buy... it is... a financial cost" (Angela).

School lockdown created additional burdens, with parents finding it hard to cover the costs of food, home schooling and leisure:

"My little boy who is five is always hungry ... I ran out of jam, bread, eggs, which is the stuff I use to fill him and really can't be going shopping again till Sunday" (Sarah).

The perpetual strain affected some families' mental health. Parents described depression, low mood, 'paranoia,' anxiety, insomnia, apathy, and a loss of routine and control. Some also felt humiliated by having to ask for help with basic survival needs:

"I feel guilty for needing to access such assistance... I feel shame" (Holly).

Children's emotional wellbeing was also being negatively affected by disruption and lockdown. Angela, a single mum, described how shops are 'not a nice environment ... to take my kids into.' The turmoil and disruption of routine and new unusual behaviours left her daughter – who had Aspergers suffering particularly, feeling that 'everything is out of kilter.'

Fragmentation & failings of support

Participants emphasised the patchwork and incomplete support offered by statutory, third sector, and private sector initiatives. Furlough was valued; but gave no long-term job security:

“He [my partner] is currently furloughed but expecting his contract to be terminated at any time with no prospect of work in his sector...” (Melissa).

Private sector and government support were also misaligned. Steph, a single mum with ‘chronic pain... mobility issues & an incurable degenerative spinal cord condition’ felt excluded from dedicated shopping times for vulnerable people because she was not listed by the government as ‘vulnerable’. Other initiatives evidenced gaps or problems, too. Free School Meals provided £15, but still left uncovered costs. When schools provided free lunch boxes, these were sometimes ‘not balanced’ (Angela) or inadequate. Angela’s daughter, for example, was dairy intolerant but received dairy products – which had to be binned – in her lunches. Other food aid could fall short too – Holly received rotten vegetables and bread:

“[T]he smell of mould was sickening. I hated having to bin them. I know beggars can’t be choosers but four loaves of inedible bread was an emotional blow.”

Parents expressed feelings of guilt and shame linked to their inadequate access to food. The loss of emotional and interrelated financial support from family was also experienced sharply. Before lockdown, grandparents had provided emotional support, but also crucial practical and financial help like shopping, lunches or dinners. The closure of schools left children without social contact with their peers, and some parents feeling unsupported or alone.

The future for families on a low-income

Participants spoke of the future with trepidation. In terms of future work, everything looked precarious. Old opportunities had already ended, the end of furlough was in sight, and some sectors looked as if they might change forever:

“The high street isn’t going to be the same. Even if my shop reopens, it may end up shutting if it doesn’t make enough money” (Jasmine).

Some had also used programmes during lockdown to defer payments or bills; the prospect of these returning, along with continuing heightened costs of lockdown, felt intimidating. Finally, some parents described how a ‘new normal’ could exacerbate their sense of inequality and exclusion as others rediscovered freedoms. For Jasmine’s family, a holiday felt unattainable:

“[O]ur holidays have been 4 nights at a Haven resort, something we’ve paid for in instalments... [T]he prices are already double what they were last August”.

Recommendations and conclusions

To date, the policy response has been missing a firm focus on the needs of families with dependent children who have – in some cases - been left hungry, fearful, stigmatised and excluded. These emergent findings from parents and carers emphasise the need for a cash injection. Supermarket vouchers given as replacements for free school meals, in contrast, have been shown to have poor uptake and are a stigmatising substitute for financial support.

Alongside project partners [Child Poverty Action Group](#), we call for an **increase to Child Benefit of £10 per child per week** to help families cope with the additional costs caused by lockdown and associated pressures around home schooling. There is also **an urgent need to embed the experiences and perspectives of people living on a low income within policy making decisions and debates**. Only by so doing can we #buildbackbetter, ensuring that the ‘new normal’ is better for us all and making a real contribution to tackling poverty across the UK.