

## **Literature Review – the impact of Covid on Children, Young People and Families in relation to poverty**

**October 2021**

### **1. Introduction**

The Covid-19 pandemic and lock down restrictions have resulted in several negative outcomes for children, young people and their families. A number of research reports and papers have been published since the first national lock down in March 2020 which highlight the impact of Covid-19 on children, young people and families, in particular for those already experiencing poverty.

The reports and research have been reviewed and summarised under key themes. The findings highlight the range of poor outcomes which in turn help the Council prioritise the groups most affected, providing information and support to vulnerable children, young people and families.

### **2. Increased levels of Food Insecurity**

Research has shown that despite vital emergency measures in place, more people are food insecure now than before the pandemic and the inequalities in food security and nutrition have widened.

Eating well in childhood is the very foundation stone of equality of opportunity, it is essential for both physical and mental growth. Research indicates that a poorly nourished child will struggle to concentrate at school, and that an obese child is extremely likely to become an obese adult, with the lifetime of health problems that entails. It is an anomaly of the modern food system that the poorest sectors of society are more likely to suffer from both hunger and obesity. It is predicted that in the post-lockdown recession, many more families will struggle to feed themselves adequately (The National Food Strategy 2020).

Food Insecurity in lower income households with children has been consistently higher than in the general population during the pandemic. 21% of households with children under 18 years old experienced food insecurity during the first two weeks of lockdown in March 2020 (The Food Foundation 2021).

Evidence has shown that it is not only children's health that is affected by hunger or poor diet, pupils who are hungry at school also struggle to concentrate, perform poorly, and have worse attendance records. Children who experience Food Insecurity, most of whom already come from the most disadvantaged families, have also been shown to suffer more from mental illness. Food Insecurity undermines any serious prospect of improving social equality (The National Food Strategy 2020).

Studies have also demonstrated that the use of food banks significantly increased during the pandemic. The Trussell Trust's network distributed more than 2.5 million emergency food parcels across the UK during the last year (1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021 inclusive). This equates to a 33% increase in the number of parcels required, when compared to the previous financial year (Trussell Trust 2021).

During the pandemic food was scarce for many low-income families, with some relying solely on food banks, it is possible that their children's nutritional status deteriorated as a result of lockdown. This is particularly concerning because children grow very quickly, and it is not always possible to redress even relatively short periods of compromised nutrition. Studies have found evidence that poorer children may end up being up to 1.6 cm shorter than those from more affluent households. Consequently, maintaining a balanced diet when relying on food banks for sustenance is known to be difficult (BMJ 2020).

Data suggests that strict lockdowns may play a part in the different levels of need reported by food banks during the pandemic. This is possibly related to the availability of informal support from friends and family, research shows that having informal support available can help prevent people from needing to use a food bank, and lockdowns severely restrict or even end the availability of this support for many. Furthermore, lockdowns have also been associated with lower levels of economic activity that might further reduce people's incomes (Trussell Trust 2021).

As income fell, many families had to rely on foodbanks to provide sufficient food for themselves. Families who were in receipt of income-related benefits were five times more likely to make use of foodbanks (Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) 2021).

Research has indicated that one of the main concerns is the overall ability of a family to function as a cohesive unit can be negatively affected by Food Insecurity. An additional burden is placed on the family as a whole, and this is also associated with mental health outcomes (BMJ 2020).

During lockdown children particularly from poorer backgrounds reported that they ate more snacks and junk food. Similarly, daily diet survey data indicated that vulnerable people including the less affluent and those with a Covid-19 health risk ate nearly a whole portion less of fruit and vegetables per day in lockdown (The National Food Strategy 2020).

The figures also indicated that children were more likely to be impacted by the crisis than adults. Last year the number of emergency food parcels distributed to children rose by 36%, compared to an increase for adults of 32%. Between April 2020 and March 2021, 2,685 parcels were given, on average, to children every day (Trussell Trust 2021).

Prior to school closures 25% of lower income household children skipped at least one meal a day, however following school closures, this increased to 35% of children skipping one meal a day and 10% skipping more than one meal per day (BMJ 2020).

Findings from a survey with 3,000 adults demonstrated that Food Insecurity is to a significant extent a consequence of economic disadvantage and high living costs. Families that reported lower incomes, and who reported higher housing costs relative to their income were more likely to be classified as in a state of very low food security. Furthermore, younger parents were more likely to report very low child food security, just under a quarter of those aged under 35 did so, compared to less than 10% of parents in their late 40s and above (The Social Market Foundation 2020).

A study provided clear evidence that disadvantaged children were both skipping meals and consuming diets that were poor in terms of fruit and vegetable intake, including eating more than the recommended number of ultra-processed snacks and drinking more than the recommended intake of sugar sweetened beverages. This is not surprising as it is evident that households with children in the bottom two deciles, earning less than £15,860, would need to spend 42% of income (after housing) to meet the Eatwell Guide costs. The additional £15 from food vouchers has not enabled households to move out of the risk of children experiencing Food Insecurity, especially at a time when household income is likely to have suffered. Concerns about the negative effects on children's health combined, with new reports on educational learning loss, suggest that there is a high probability that the poorest children will be most disadvantaged when they start the new academic year (Healthy Living Lab 2020).

Food Insecurity in households with children followed a similar trend to in the general population, improving as restrictions eased over the summer of 2020. Most recent findings indicate further improvement, suggesting Government measures like the continuation of Free School Meal provision during lockdowns and holiday provision funded through the Covid Winter Grant Scheme have helped prevent a deterioration for low income households during the winter (The Food Foundation 2021).

### **3. Impact on Earnings**

Studies have shown that many low-income working households were disproportionately affected by the economic impact of Covid-19 due to the sectors they tend to work in. The impact on earnings and financial security has been among the most immediate impacts of Covid-19, particularly for those on low wages.

The average household gained £7,800 additional wealth per adult between February 2020 and May 2021, however, the wealthiest 10% of households gained £50,000 per adult, whereas the poorest 10% gained just £86 per adult (LGIU July 2021).

Around 8 in 10 respondents to a survey with 285 low income families reported a significant deterioration in their living standards, due to a combination of falling income and rising expenditure. Furthermore, families whose employment had not been disrupted, including those not working prior to the pandemic, the majority reported a worsening in their financial situation (Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) 2020).

Furthermore, in low-income working households, the increase in being behind with bills went from 9% pre-pandemic to 21% in April–May 2020, however this fell back to 10% during quarter 1 2021. For workless households, the increase was from 26% pre-pandemic to 28% during quarter 1 2021 (LGIU August 2021).

Research findings have shown that Covid-19 was likely to have had a particularly detrimental impact on the estimated four million children and young people already living in poverty in the United Kingdom. Furthermore it has been estimated that 1.7 million children aged 10-17 years are living in a household with problem debt, and an estimated 2.1 million children of the same age are living in a household where there has been difficulty paying bills (The Children's Society 2020).

A survey of more than 8,000 individuals demonstrated that whilst more affluent households reported an increase in wealth around 30% of families in the bottom 20% of the income distribution reported their savings had decreased because of the

pandemic. Furthermore, the changes in debt were also skewed, approximately 10% of low earners reported their debt had reduced, whereas over 25% of higher earners reported debt had reduced during the pandemic (Resolution Foundation 2021).

Within the broad groups most affected, there are larger impacts on some people at most risk of poverty before Covid-19, including; low income families with children of whom many saw costs rise during lockdown restrictions, areas scoring highly on the Index of Multiple Deprivation and many Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic households (JRF 2020).

The effects on household finances – taking account of income, spending, savings and debt – are unequal both within and between different parts of the country; this has implications for the recovery as not all places will be able to rely on Covid-savings being spent, and some places will have higher levels of problem debt than before (LGIU July 2021).

Low-income groups and part-time workers were most likely to have been furloughed, and furloughed staff experienced twenty percent cuts from their already low wages (Marmot et al 2020).

Some research has indicated that relative poverty is likely to be higher than before the Covid-19 pandemic, with families who were already struggling to cope financially becoming even worse off financially. These increases in poverty will be mainly among working-age families as they will be affected by the negative labour market changes and the increases prevalent in the cost of living.

Research indicated that the pandemic and support measures that were introduced for individuals and businesses have further exacerbated wealth inequality within the United Kingdom, many lower income families are facing debt. As payment deferrals and the furlough scheme end the Money and Pensions Service are anticipating a 60% increase in demand for urgent debt advice (The Centre for Social Justice 2021).

Low income families frequently lack a financial buffer, for example no savings and limited access to credit to provide security in times of financial stress. Furthermore, the necessity to spend a higher proportion of income than pre-Covid-19 on essentials has meant that a large drop in income has led to many families experiencing hardship and being behind with bills (JRF 2021).

Studies by the charity StepChange revealed that whilst more affluent families were able to accrue savings during the pandemic, the numbers in “severe” debt rose by over 600,000 to 2.4 million during 2020 (The Centre for Social Justice 2021).

Those in the lowest income bracket (up to £10,000 per annum) also continued to be more likely to report negative impacts to personal well-being in comparison with higher brackets, for example the pandemic made their mental health worse (18%) and they felt stressed or anxious (32%) (ONS May 2021).

Research has highlighted long term economic effects that include loss of future earnings and unemployment, pushing more adults, particularly parents, into poverty. The effect of the pandemic on employment is predicted to be 10 times greater than that of the 2008 financial crisis, which led to a sharp increase in suicides and mental illness (BMJ 2021).

Studies indicated that households with low incomes saw larger rises in deprivation during the pandemic than did higher-income households. There was also evidence

that increased difficulties were concentrated among poor working households rather than poor workless households (Institute for Fiscal Studies July 2021).

It is important to note that the income of the poorest have been protected by increases to benefits and protective effects in the poorest regions. However, it is anticipated that when the Covid-19 related relief schemes and benefit increases end, widening regional inequalities in income and wealth will be experienced (Marmot et al 2020).

Without policy interventions, the gap between the wealthiest and the poorest is likely to persist: a gap existed long before the pandemic and has been further widened by it (LGIU July 2021).

#### **4. Increased Numbers of Young People Not in Education Training or Employment (NEET)**

National studies have demonstrated that during the pandemic the numbers of young people NEET significantly increased.

During October to December 2020, an estimated 11.6% of all young people aged 16 to 24 years were NEET. The proportion was up by 0.6 percentage points from October to December 2019 and increased on the quarter by 0.6 percentage points. An estimated 13.2% of men aged 16 to 24 years were NEET, which was the highest since October to December 2013, and for women the proportion was at 10.0% (ONS 2021).

There were an estimated 797,000 young people in the UK who were NEET in October to December 2020; this increased by 39,000 compared with July to September 2020 and was up by 34,000 compared with October to December 2019. The quarterly increase of 39,000 was the largest since the quarter of July to September 2011 (ONS 2021).

Evidence indicates that in the year following the pandemic there has been a fall in the number of young people who are NEET. The percentage of young people who are NEET has fallen from 11.4% in January to March 2020 to 10.6% in January to March 2021 (House of Commons Library July 2021).

Studies predict that as labour market conditions decline because of containment measures, the structural factors will become more adverse for young people including increasing unemployment, whilst the availability of training schemes declines. The prioritisation of training, apprenticeship placements and employment for young people is key to address this issue (Marmot et al 2020).

Findings from studies have shown that time spent NEET can have a detrimental effect on physical and mental health, and increase the likelihood of unemployment, low wages, or low quality of work later in life (House of Commons Library July 2021).

Research also indicates that certain sectors have been particularly impacted by the pandemic, in general, those hardest hit have been young workers, those in relatively low-paying employment and those working in sectors such as hospitality and retail (Legatum Institute 2020).

Studies reported that young people are two and a half times more likely to be in a sector that has closed and are particularly vulnerable to becoming unemployed due to their lack of experience in work. Recruitment incentive schemes for employers have been introduced by the Government including Traineeships, Apprenticeships, Skills

Training, Skills Bootcamps, funding for level 2 and 3 courses for 18 and 19 year olds and intensive support for young jobseekers (House of Commons Library March 2021).

There appears to be have been a distinct shift in the decisions school leavers are making over the course of the pandemic, choosing to take up places in higher education rather than immediately entering the job market. Crucial to these encouraging statistics is the availability of well-paid jobs and opportunities available to young people when they leave education (APPG 2021).

One particularly positive step for young people's employment prospects is the Kickstart Scheme launched by the Government last September, this provides funding for employers to create placements for young people who are at risk of long-term unemployment (Marmot et al 2020).

## **5. Increased isolation for parents, in particular new parents**

Studies have indicated that the pandemic and lockdown restrictions have resulted in increased feelings of isolation and anxiety for some parents to be and new parents.

Evidence demonstrates that the specific conditions of the lockdown increased parental stressors known to impact negatively on caregiving. Factors such as increased levels of stress; high levels of concern about mental health; low confidence in accessing mental health support; significantly reduced social support; and problems accessing reliable information about risks for pregnant women and babies all made parenting more difficult during the pandemic (Babies in Lockdown 2020).

Whilst for most parents having a new baby will be a source of untold joy, and although the pandemic added to the challenges new parents faced, many responded in innovative ways, for example introducing grandparents over Zoom, or having virtual meet-ups with friends. For some families, however, the additional pressure that the arrival of a baby brought on relationships, finances, and mental health, pushed them into crisis (Childrens Commissioner 2020).

A survey with over 5,000 parents found that six in ten (61%) had shared significant concerns regarding their mental health and many also reported feeling isolated and lonely during the Pandemic (Babies in Lockdown 2020).

A study undertaken with families with children under four years by Nottingham Trent University on behalf of Small Steps Big Changes in Nottingham City recommended that parents who felt isolated during lockdown should be put in touch with others in their community, especially where English is not their first language, in order to address social and cultural isolation (Nottingham Trent University 2020).

The Children's Commissioner's Office was particularly concerned about the limitations in support offered to new families under lockdown, reductions in contact with health visitors and the inability to maintain birth registers. At the best of times, around 10% of new mothers face perinatal mental illness, but when Children's Centres, playgroups and playgrounds were closed, GP and health visitor appointments were often via phone or video link, and access to mental health support was more challenging the risk was further exacerbated. The impact of bringing a new baby home into a family experiencing these severe risk factors, in a high pressure situation where the children are at home all day, parents are already stressed, one or other parents may have lost their job (1.5million people claimed universal credit in the five weeks following 16<sup>th</sup>

March, well over 1million more than usually would), and grandparents and friends were not allowed to visit and offer support (Children's Commissioner 2020).

A qualitative study of new mothers found virus-related anxiety was ubiquitous sometimes leading to self-enforced lockdown, an increased sense of sole responsibility, a sense of feeling cheated of the joys of pregnancy, guilt around a number of associated things including; infant feeding decisions, care for older children, feelings around partners being excluded from scans, and also a bleak feeling about the future (First 1001 Days Movement 2021).

Research has indicated that maternal mental health is a particular concern during the early years of parenthood, whatever the family's situation, given the clear link that has been established between a mother's state of mind and her child's wellbeing. In fact, poor maternal health is one of ten Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) whose impacts can stretch far into a child's future if not addressed properly at the time (JRF February 2021).

Survey findings suggested that parents whose children were already at higher risk of poor outcomes, such as families with a low household income, young parents and those from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities were more likely to have a difficult experience of lockdown, thus further exacerbating existing inequalities (Babies in Lockdown 2020).

Parents raising children on low incomes were not only facing the universal challenge of adjusting to life with a new person in the family, but also the stress and strain that a lack of money can bring and the added pandemic restrictions. There is a robust association between material hardship and parental stress. Maternal depression is much more likely when the mother feels she lacks the basics she and her child need to get by (JRF February 2021).

The strains of juggling work, children and perhaps also home-schooling siblings was widely acknowledged to have compounded general stress, particularly for new parents. Well documented pronounced gender inequalities in domestic responsibilities during lockdown were likely to have further exacerbated this for mothers (First 1001 Days Movement 2021).

For some new parents the lockdown brought advantages, for example increased time at home and the presence of fathers and other co-parents. However, for many the time was one of considerable stress, with exacerbations of usual concerns during birth and entry to parenthood manifesting into severe and unacceptable experiences for them (Babies in Lockdown 2020).

As vulnerable children and their families struggle with isolation, conflict and poverty, community infrastructure is vital for them to access the family support they need. Holistic and joined-up approaches to delivering area-based family services are key, for example Family Hubs to ensure families with children and young people aged 0-19 receive early help to overcome a range of difficulties and build stronger relationships (Children's Commissioner 2021).

## **6. Emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people**

Research suggests that the emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people living in low income families has been negatively impacted by Covid-19.

Studies have shown that children and young people living in poverty are more likely to experience poor mental health and wellbeing outcomes. The pandemic risks pushing many more children, young people, and families into poverty, whilst also exacerbating problems for those who were already living in poverty. Research found that children and young people were anxious about finances for them and/or their families (Barnardo's 2020).

Research undertaken during the pandemic suggests that while some young people were coping well, others were at increased risk of experiencing poor mental health through a combination of new and additional stresses and pressures at home, reduced access to much-needed services, and limited opportunities for social interaction and support from friends and wider family. There is also some evidence to indicate that the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable children and young people, including those living in poverty and overcrowded housing, whose parents suffer with poor mental health, young carers, children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and children and young people at risk of suffering harm (Early Intervention Foundation 2021).

Evidence indicates that children growing up in households with problem debt are five times more likely than other children to have low well-being, and so for families that lost employment or income, and had to rely on credit due to the pandemic the consequences may be significant. Study findings have also demonstrated that any experience of poverty or financial strain during childhood is linked to lower well-being and poorer mental health at 14 years of age (The Children's Society 2020).

Children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds have been identified to be at higher risk of developing mental health illnesses because of the pandemic. Potential contributing factors cited include school closures, food poverty, poor access to technology and risks of homelessness that have increased the risk of mental health decline and susceptibility to mental health conditions, for example post-traumatic stress among this group (Marmot et al 2020).

During the pandemic disadvantaged young people and children, for example those who are disadvantaged financially or children in care, may have experienced poorer mental health and wellbeing including anxiety and loneliness. A larger proportion of children from households with lower annual incomes were identified as having possible/probable mental disorders, such as emotion and hyperactivity problems, than those children from households with higher annual incomes (Gov.UK 2021).

Research has shown that during the pandemic, parents and carers from households with lower annual incomes (less than £16,000) reported that their children had higher levels of symptoms of behavioural, emotional, and attentional difficulties than parents and carers from households with a higher annual income (greater than £16,000) (Co-Space 2021).

One in five children in lower income households spent lockdown in an overcrowded home, and children from Black Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds faced particular challenges. They were more likely to experience poorer indoor conditions than white children, and also had less access to outdoor space (Judge et al 2020). Overcrowding can result in more limited opportunities for children to play, as well as a lack of quiet space in the home for learning and can have an impact on wellbeing (White 2018).

A study of self-harm rates in young women found that the proportion of young women (aged 16 to 34) who had self-harmed during the past year was five times higher among



those living in the most deprived households compared with those in the least deprived households (NatCen 2021).

Research highlighted increases in loneliness and social isolation among young people as being a serious concern, particularly from vulnerable groups including low income and Black and Minority Ethnic families. Trauma, loss of loved ones and being unable to spend time with family and friends during difficult periods has impacted on significant numbers of young people. Those in the 16 to 29 year age bracket were more likely to report experiencing acute loneliness than those aged 60+. However, those from more privileged backgrounds, that have not had to face immediate financial hardship or that could engage in hobbies and socialise safely, did report enjoying spending additional time with family and loved ones and struggled less (LGIU July 2021).

The deteriorating mental health of young people and reductions in available mental health services are among the clearest immediate health impacts of the lockdown measures. Gaps in the provision of mental health services for children and young people were already a serious concern prior to the pandemic and have become even more acute subsequently (Marmot et al 2020).

Studies have demonstrated that overall children have experienced reductions in mental health symptoms as restrictions eased in March 2021, however children from low income families and those with SEND have continued to show elevated mental health symptoms (Co-Space 2021).

## **7. Emotional health and wellbeing of parents and carers**

There is increasing evidence regarding the impact that Covid-19 and lockdown measures have on the emotional health and wellbeing of people in the United Kingdom. Additionally, certain groups may be at higher risk of adverse mental health impacts based on factors including socioeconomic status, mental health status prior to the pandemic, age, ethnicity and vulnerability to health impacts of the virus. The pandemic could lead to a widening of already existing mental health inequalities within the United Kingdom (Marmot et al 2020).

The distribution of infections and deaths during the pandemic, lockdown restrictions and the longer-term socioeconomic impact are likely to intensify the financial inequalities that contribute towards the increased prevalence and unequal distribution of mental ill-health (Mental Health Foundation 2020).

A wide range of research has already demonstrated that those who were struggling most before the pandemic have been hit the hardest, including low income households. The prevalence of moderate to severe symptoms of depression has risen most amongst those unable to afford an unexpected expense (Legatum Institute 2020).

Studies also demonstrated that for some vulnerable groups, including people living in poverty or with pre-existing mental and physical health conditions, social support was persistently lower (by about 10–15%) than for those from more affluent households, or without physical or mental health conditions (The Health Foundation 2021).

Research indicated that certain cohorts of parents and carers were especially vulnerable to distress during lockdown restrictions than parents and carers in other families. The level of strain felt by parents and carers in; low income families, single

parent families and those supporting children with SEND was further exacerbated. The findings demonstrated that the parents and carers from these certain households were particularly vulnerable to elevated mental health symptoms, higher levels of stress, depression, and anxiety (Co-Space 2021).

A study with low income families revealed many parents and carers reported experiencing stress or anxiety as a direct result of Covid-19. This was caused mainly by worries about money including the rising cost of food and utility bills, not being able to buy their children what they needed and the impact on their benefits (CPAG 2020).

Evidence has shown that it is easier to parent more effectively when social and economic circumstances are favourable, and when stress and anxiety are lower (Marmot et al 2020).

Many parents and carers with mental health issues are able to parent well but the increased anxiety caused by Covid-19 sharpens the challenge, the additional stress of the pandemic and financial worries have made it harder for some parents to provide safe, nurturing and responsive care (Children's Commissioner 2021).

Research indicated that the pandemic compounded mental health and economic hardship, those who experienced income loss, loss of pay or had a minimal safety net were more likely to report poorer mental health (The Health Foundation 2021).

Studies on the mental health effects of the pandemic, have shown that the burden of mental distress is borne disproportionately by those with less economic security. Unless action is taken to protect vulnerable people's economic security and support them in dealing with the resulting stress, mental health inequalities are likely to be exacerbated as the pandemic and the ensuing economic downturn proceed (Mental Health Foundation 2020).

## **7. Educational Outcomes**

There is growing evidence around the impact of school closures due to Covid-19 on the learning outcomes of pupils. Research (DfE 2021, Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) 2020, 2021 and GL Assessment 2021) shows a consistent pattern:

- There is a large attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils, which seems to have grown.
- Pupils have made less academic progress compared with previous year groups.

Studies have shown a consistent impact of the first national lockdown with pupils making around two months less progress than similar pupils in previous years.

The loss of learning during lockdown has disproportionately affected children from disadvantaged groups. Some figures suggest that pupils in certain year groups are now 15 to 22 months behind where they ordinarily would be (Children's Commissioner 2021).

Whilst many studies have shown similar learning effects between English and mathematics, some recent studies including the analysis commissioned by DfE (Education Policy Institute, Renaissance Learning 2021) does indicate some increased learning loss for mathematics.

Research has highlighted that pupils from lower-income families in the United Kingdom were spending less time on home learning. 41% of secondary school pupils

from the highest-income households spent at least four hours a day on schoolwork, compared to only 23% of pupils from the lowest-income households (Equality and Human Rights Commission 2020).

The fact that children from lower income households had much less overall learning time during lockdown is predicted to have serious effects in the long-term, both in terms of educational progression and in the labour market. It will be crucial there is significant investment in remedial education and a relaxation of the usual standards that enable children to transition between different stages of education (i.e. from GCSE to post-16 courses; from upper secondary courses to tertiary education) (Institute for Fiscal Studies March 2021).

Most studies to date have taken place in primary schools and the research is consistent with surveys of parents and teachers on access to education during the pandemic, which indicates disparities in access to technology and levels of parental support - one potential explanation for why gaps might open up between groups of pupils. The recent evidence is also consistent with prior research, which shows differential learning loss during summer holidays and other school closures, which is summarised in the EEF Rapid Evidence Assessment (EEF Rapid Evidence Assessment on School Closures 2020). This research also predicted that school closures are likely to reverse almost a decade's worth of progress in closing the attainment gap between children in poverty and their more affluent peers.

Policy interventions such as delivering laptops to disadvantaged pupils, more clarity about how much content teachers were expected to cover, better resources such as the Oak National Academy online lessons, and a greater number of key worker and disadvantaged children attending school in-person all suggest that home learning might have been more effective during the second round of school closures. However, even a better overall experience does not mean that the impacts on inequalities for vulnerable children and young people will have been erased (Institute for Fiscal Studies March 2021).

Studies have also demonstrated that many parents and carers of children with SEND reported that even in cases where schools had initially provided high quality work, digital or printed materials, they felt it would not be possible to maintain the levels of learning and specialist teaching their child required (Marmot et al 2020).

## **8. Physical Health**

Studies have demonstrated there is a clear relationship between health inequalities and income inequalities, people in poorer households tend to have poorer health and people with poorer health tend to be more likely to have lower incomes (JRF 2021).

Evidence also indicates that the economically disadvantaged, those living in more deprived areas of the United Kingdom and minority ethnic groups all experience greater prevalence of non-communicable diseases and conditions that are given as underlying clinical risk factors for Covid-19 (British Academy 2021).

Studies indicated that where the United Kingdom entered the pandemic with such high rates of obesity and diet-related disease this undoubtedly contributed to the very high death rate. These are among the worst risk factors for dying of the virus and are more prevalent amongst the poorest in society. Obesity is significantly more prevalent in the lowest income decile than in the highest (36% of the most deprived in society are

obese compared with 21% of the least deprived). The statistics are even more skewed for children, by the age of 11, children from the poorest neighbourhoods are three times more likely to be obese than those from the richest ones, and this gap is growing (The National Food Strategy 2020).

Research has shown that levels of physical activity are closely related to physical and mental health outcomes. There are pre-existing inequalities in levels of physical activity related to socioeconomic position, and more advantaged groups tend to have higher levels of physical activity (Marmot et al 2020).

Poorer communities have also been more vulnerable to severe disease once infected because of higher levels of pre-existing illness. The increased rates of infection have also led to greater loss of income linked to disruptions to work and job loss in more deprived areas (BMJ 2021).

Furthermore, studies have identified that those who experience financial strain or periods of unemployment that result in lack of income, status and structure are susceptible to poorer physical and mental health. The pandemic poses a risk to further erode people's health by an increase in poverty and a decline in living conditions (The Health Foundation 2021).

There are also inequalities in access to gardens for low income families, and this will have impacted on levels of physical activity and wellbeing. Studies have demonstrated that exercising outside can have a more positive mental health impact than other forms of exercise. Therefore, lockdown and social isolation have been much more harmful to those without access to gardens (Marmot et al 2020).

Covid-19 mortality rates were highest in more deprived areas, even after controlling for a range of other factors, there have been an average of 21 more Covid-19 deaths per 100,000 population in the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods, compared to the 20% least deprived (Legatum Institute 2020).

Research demonstrated that prior to the pandemic, women living in England's most socioeconomically deprived 10% of local areas were already expected to live 19 fewer years in good health than those in the least deprived 10%. Covid-19 mortality also followed a similar pattern in deaths by deprivation as was the case before the pandemic (The Health Foundation 2021).

## **9. Digital Access**

Research has shown Covid-19 restrictions have highlighted the extent and consequences of digital exclusion for low income families, especially in relation to education and employment with many people unable to work remotely from home. Digital exclusion is not only about access to broadband and ICT equipment, it covers an array of issues relating to levels of access, levels of digital skills, and education (JRF 2021).

Studies have demonstrated that parents and carers in low income families have struggled with online learning for their children either due to not being able to afford the technology, or the technology they had was broken (CPAG 2020).

Digitally excluded individuals risk losing their voice and visibility as Government services and democratic engagement are increasingly moved online and digital

exclusion impinges on children's rights to education, information and participation (The Carnegie UK Trust 2020).

Some research also suggests that parents and carers on low incomes reported facing more stress and worry regarding home learning and household finances than parents and carers in more affluent homes. The cost burdens of school closures significantly impacted families already living on a low income, and families who were worried about money were also more likely to report they had found it difficult to continue their children's education at home (CPAG 2020).

Furthermore 40% of low-income families reported they were missing at least one essential resource to support their children's learning, and one third of the families who were most concerned about money have had to buy a laptop, tablet or other device (CPAG 2020).

Evidence also indicates that along with digital poverty the issue of digital fatigue was raised with many young people feeling overwhelmed by the amount of time they had to spend on their computers and smartphones. The mental health implications of this are not well understood, but it appears to have contributed to lack of energy, lower morale and lower productivity among many young people during the pandemic (LGIU July 2021).

The negative impacts of digital exclusion are felt in all aspects of life, from the ability to access work and resulting impacts on income, quality of education, availability of healthcare, costs of goods or services, and even the ability to connect with loved ones during incredibly challenging times (The Carnegie UK Trust 2020).

The digital divide, with too many students having no access to online learning, was just one reason that, despite the huge efforts of many teachers and support staff, more than two million children did hardly any learning during the first school shutdown (Children's Commissioner 2021).

The Government attempted to mitigate through an extensive distribution of laptops and 4G routers to school children. However, research found that 1 in 5 children who were eligible for free school meals did not have a laptop at home. Local authorities have limited capacity to respond to new challenges like digital poverty on top of existing social care pressures and responding to community needs (LGIU July 2021).

## **10. Safeguarding and Domestic Abuse**

The continued impact for low income families of welfare reforms, those affected by the benefit cap, in-work poverty, and the economic downturn were significant determinants of presenting factors, including parental mental ill health, domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and child neglect. Respondents to a survey reported that the impact of the pandemic was extremely concerning in terms of exacerbating disadvantage for children and their families in lower income households (ADCS 2021).

During the pandemic studies indicated that domestic abuse had been reported to be higher amongst those with a lower household income, under the age of 60, and those with existing mental health conditions. It was also reported to be slightly higher in people living with children compared to those living with just other adults in a household (Fancourt, D. et al. 2020).

Furthermore, during the pandemic, the wider societal determinants of family distress including poverty, employment and housing concerns emerged as pressures that plunged families who would ordinarily manage into crisis (ADCS 2021).

With lockdown restrictions vulnerable children and young people were spending more time in their homes with their family members. The opportunity for them to witness domestic abuse and/or endure emotional or physical abuse at the hands of family members was increased. Children and young people also no longer had the opportunity to take refuge at school, youth clubs or organisations; and were spending less time with their teachers and youth workers, who are all trained to pick up on evidence of abuse (The Childhood Trust 2020).

Research with nearly 1,000 frontline workers indicated that during lockdown many children did not have their basic needs met and ACEs had risen due to additional financial strain during lockdown, particularly for low income families. Respondents also reported that domestic abuse cases had risen due to tensions in the home, and there were generally more difficulties in family relationships. Some responses again highlighted how school is often a safe haven from the adversity's children face at home, and this had not been available to children (Buttle 2020).

Research findings have indicated that there is a strong link between low income and the rise in domestic abuse. Furthermore, in families with no previous history of domestic abuse, financial stress coupled with lack of social support is known to exacerbate violence, and the lockdown restrictions further increased frustration and violence within many lower income households. (Centre for Women's Justice 2020).

Evidence from previous pandemics suggests that exposure to domestic abuse increases during lockdown measures, leaving vulnerable children, young people and women at further risk of abuse by family members and partners with the associated long-lasting psychological impacts (OECD 2020).

Social isolation policies have been shown to increase vulnerability to domestic abuse. There is a risk that in isolation, perpetrators intensify their controlling behaviour, further restrict their partners' freedom and threaten their safety during Covid-19 lockdowns. Primary risk factors, for example financial dependence and poverty diminish resilience when experiencing domestic abuse and can prevent people from leaving an abusive partner (Marmot et al 2020).

## **11. Recommendations**

The above literature review demonstrates a number of key interlocking factors that have affected many low-income families during the pandemic. Consideration needs to be given as to how existing programmes and initiatives can be improved in order to meet identified areas of need, and also how new initiatives can be introduced in order to ensure that low income families receive the support that they need going forwards as the country emerges from the pandemic.

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