

The cost-of-living crisis, poverty, and child maltreatment

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Over 30% of children in England live in poverty.¹ According to the Governor of the Bank of England, this figure is likely to worsen, as the current cost-of-living crisis impedes families from being able to buy essential items. For example, 2.6 million children were food insecure in April, 2022,² and the Trussell Trust supplied over 2 million emergency food packages to families between April 1, 2021, and March 31, 2022.³ The Resolution Foundation anticipates that a further 500000 children in the UK will fall below the UK poverty line by 2023.⁴ The number of children in out-of-home care is also increasing, with child poverty rates in 2015–20 being linked with more than 10000 additional children entering state care.⁵

Poverty impacts individuals and families negatively in numerous ways, but one of the most pervasive outcomes is the increased likelihood of child abuse and neglect. However, poverty is often overlooked as a causal factor in child abuse and neglect. For example, there are no mentions of poverty, income, debt, or employment as factors in the lives of children and families in the UK Government's national guidance on child protection.⁶ Similarly, the recent national Independent Care Review judged that action on family poverty fell outside its terms of reference.⁷

Child protection policy and practice is too often characterised by insufficient focus on socioeconomic context, despite a growing evidence base regarding its importance. For example, the Child Welfare Inequality Project, a large study of thousands of children in local authorities across the UK, found a steep and consistent social gradient in the proportion of children on child protection plans or in care. In the most deprived decile of neighbourhoods, one in every 35 children was in care or on a protection plan. In the least deprived decile, less than one in 400 children was in care or on a protection plan.⁸

The social gradient is also steeper within low deprivation local authorities compared with high deprivation local authorities, where more is spent on family support, relative to need.⁸ Research done by the Department for Education in the UK, which for the first time used income data for individual households, also found a social gradient in the proportion of children on child protection plans or in care.⁹ This social gradient becomes steeper the further into the care system a family goes.⁹ Having more resources not only protects a child from needing a referral but, if referred, the child is less likely to be assessed and, if assessed, is less likely to be placed on a protection plan or into care.

These studies show that a child's chance of experiencing a state intervention for child abuse or neglect is associated with their family income, which in turn affects the need or demand for services. Intervention rates are a product of demand, supply, and how services respond. These studies demonstrate that the likelihood of children being placed on child protection plans, or being looked after by the state, is unequal and in violation of the social justice and human rights principles stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They highlight a clear need for national policies that aim to reduce social inequalities.

A recent Nuffield Foundation-funded systematic review investigated the effect that poverty has on child abuse and neglect.¹⁰ This review identified 19 quasi-experimental studies, and used differences or changes in benefits, minimum wage levels, or sudden economic shocks to compare two equivalent populations. The review found overall positive effects for income increases, which decreased the likelihood of child maltreatment, and negative effects for income reduction, instability, and unemployment, all of which increased the likelihood of child maltreatment.

These findings reinforce the importance of improving understanding around the ways in which children come to harm in the context of poverty. There are multiple explanatory theories; however, two clear pathways are proposed through which poverty is thought to increase the likelihood of child abuse and neglect. First, a direct effect through material hardship (the Investment Model); and second, an indirect effect through parental stress and neighbourhood conditions (the Family Stress Model). These factors can influence the likelihood of child maltreatment independently, in conjunction with one another, or, most frequently, by interacting with other factors.

In summary, the evidence shows a strong association between poverty and child abuse and neglect, with individuals in more deprived areas and lower-income households experiencing the highest burden. Preventing harm to children can be achieved but requires a substantial change in government policies on family poverty, and for practitioners to recognise and engage much more effectively with the impact of poverty on everyday lives and relationships in families. The COVID-19 pandemic showed that governments can implement profound policy changes that have a direct affect on the socioeconomic conditions of family life and, similarly, that services can markedly and rapidly change how they practice. In the absence of a similar strategic response, the worsening cost-of-living crisis will result not only in the oft-repeated choice between heating and eating, but will have damaging long-term effects on children's relationships, development, and safety.

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3 The Trussell Trust. End of year stats. <https://www.trusselltrust.org/newsand-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/> (accessed July 27, 2022).

4 Resolution Foundation. Lack of support for low-income families will see 1.3 million people pushed in absolute poverty next year. March 24, 2022. <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/press-releases/33284/> (accessed July 28, 2022).

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6 HM Government. Working together to safeguard children: a guide to interagency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/942454/Working_together_to_safeguard_children_inter_agency_guidance.pdf (accessed Aug 16, 2022).

7 The independent review of children’s social care. Final report. May, 2022. <https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/final-report/> (accessed July 27, 2022).

8 Child Welfare Inequalities Project. Final report. July, 2020. https://pure.hud.ac.uk/ws/files/21398145/CWIP_Final_Report.pdf (accessed Aug 16, 2022).

9 UK Department for Education. Drivers of activity in children’s social care. May, 2022. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1080111/Drivers_of_Activity_in_Children_s_Social_Care.pdf (accessed Aug 16, 2022).

10 Bywaters P, Skinner G, Cooper A, et al. The relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect: new evidence. March, 2022. <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Full-reportrelationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect.pdf> (accessed July 27, 2022).