

# Increased child benefit may help families escape lockdown inequality

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Policy makers should increase child benefit and consider difficulties faced by families on low incomes in order to avoid the COVID-19 pandemic heightening existing inequalities and creating new ones,

according to a new study.

COVID-19 has caused additional, often extreme, hardship in families' lives with policy responses often not focused on the needs of families with dependent children. Now, as we approach the end of lockdown, the 'future' looks highly uncertain for many.

Researchers at the Universities of Birmingham and York say that the 'new normal' brings with it new costs for such families, who have—in some cases—been left hungry, fearful, stigmatized and excluded.

Emergent findings from researchers' participatory work with parents and carers emphasize the need for a cash injection—highlighting that supermarket vouchers replacing free school meals have had a poor uptake, often seen as a stigmatizing substitute for financial support.

Working with Child Poverty Action Group, the researchers launched the COVID Realities project to explore the experiences of parents and carers on low incomes, discovering among other things that:

- Daily essentials became more costly and less available, raising household costs;
- People's mental health is suffering from both new and compounded strains;
- Financial, emotional, and [social support](#) are needed to navigate additional barriers;
- Food provision is sometimes insufficient, causing parents/carers to feel guilty; and
- Future concerns focus on finding work and managing financial difficulties, as lockdown eases.

Researcher Dr. Kayleigh Garthwaite, a Birmingham Fellow in the Department of Social Policy, Sociology and Criminology, commented:

"We're calling 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.

"We must also embed the experiences and perspectives of people living on a low income within policy making decisions and debates. Only by so doing can we ensure the 'new normal' is better for us all and make a real contribution to tackling poverty across the UK."

Researchers worked with parents and carers, who kept diaries and took part in activities during June 2020, to produce their initial findings.

The COVID Realities project will see parents and carers managing on a tight budget share their experiences in online diaries and activities—working with the research team to develop recommendations for policy change. Findings from the 18-month project—funded by the Nuffield Foundation—will seek to influence the evolving social security policy response.

Parents and carers described how lockdown made their usual budgetary practices impossible, for example visiting different supermarkets to find the best prices or buying unbranded goods. Several families across the UK have already shared their experiences with researchers as part of a pilot study, including Angela, a single parent of two young children, in receipt of Universal Credit, who said:

"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," said Angela.

Sarah, a mother of two boys, said, "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."

Researchers discovered that perpetual strain affected some families' mental health, with parents describing 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.

"Parents expressed feelings of guilt and shame linked to their inadequate access to food," added Dr. Garthwaite. "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."

Dr. Garthwaite added that some parents and carers had also used programs during lockdown to defer payments or bills. They now felt intimidated at the prospect of these returning, along with continuing heightened costs of lockdown.

**More information:** More information can be found on the Covid Realities: [www.covidrealities.org/](http://www.covidrealities.org/)

Provided by University of Birmingham

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