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The impact of poverty on child mental health

A **Buttle UK** survey: Support workers' perspective

Executive Summary

Buttle UK is a national children's charity providing grants that directly support children and young people in crisis. The applications for these grants come from a unique network of frontline support workers who are interacting with the most vulnerable children and young people across the UK on a daily basis.

These individuals include family support workers, community project workers, social workers, health visitors, school careers advisors, probation officers, advocacy/advisors, youth workers, community nurses, tutors and head teachers. They work for organisations such as local authorities / councils, charities, housing associations, advice services, local healthcare trust partnerships, primary and secondary schools and children's centres.

We surveyed support workers to find out about their current experiences of working with children in poverty. While all these individuals are used to seeing child poverty on a daily basis, their feedback illustrates the extent of some of the challenges that families are currently facing.

We had over 1,200 responses to our quantitative survey questions, making this an extremely comprehensive survey. Additionally, over 140 respondents completed qualitative aspects of our questionnaire, providing descriptive insight into the issues children and young people in poverty face and the impact this can have on them. This paper focuses on the insight these frontline professionals have provided on the impact of poverty on children's mental health.

Quantitative findings

- > 65% of supporter workers see poverty having a **large negative impact** on children's **mental health**.
- > 60% of supporter workers seeing poverty have a **large negative impact** on children's **self-esteem**.

Support workers reported the following specific areas as having a large negative impact on children's mental health:

- > 58% - family financial pressure
- > 54% - not enough sleep
- > 53% - social isolation
- > 45% - bullying
- > 42% - not enough exercise
- > 42% - screen time

Qualitative findings

The supporter workers providing qualitative feedback reported a range of other issues affecting children's mental health:

- > 29% noted the impact of difficulties in family relationships. Of these:
 - > 41% referred to parenting / the parent-child relationship
 - > 51% referred to the relationship between parents (i.e., couple relationships)
 - > 17% referred to sibling relationships
 - > 10% referred to the extended family
- > 15% observed the impact of parent mental health problems
- > 13% noted exposure to / witnessing drug and alcohol abuse and crime
- > 9% reported the impact that being a young carer can have
- > 11% highlighted that children's mental health can suffer when there are issues around school and education.
- > 11% drew attention to the relationship they see between housing issues, of which 38% referred to overcrowding in particular.
- > 9% reported that problems with peer relationships and 11% noted that they commonly see social media use among children impacting mental health.

Methodology & Respondents

We identified 10,000 support workers that we have worked with to support children with our grants through our database. We emailed these support workers an online questionnaire that asked about the issues they see the children and families that they work with experiencing, in order to develop a picture of frontline workers' experiences of children in poverty.

We asked a range of quantitative questions to find out about the extent to which respondents witness children experience difficulties affording the essentials, a disadvantaged access to education, and issues linked to crime. Findings from these questions have been presented in our previously published reports.^{1,2} Some of these findings are referenced in this report in the 'Recap' sections.

We also asked respondents about the extent to which they see children in poverty experience mental health problems, and factors that contribute to these issues. Over 1200 respondents completed the quantitative questions, and over 140 provided invaluable responses to our qualitative questions, providing descriptive insight into how children's mental health can be affected by poverty. This report outlines the main findings with regards to experiences of mental health problems of some of the most vulnerable children across the UK, from frontline practitioners' perspectives.



The impact of poverty on child mental health and related outcomes

We asked support workers to what extent children are affected by poverty, specifically asking about: isolation from peers, self-esteem, educational attainment, opportunities to develop and learn, access to the same opportunities as peers and their mental health. Respondents most commonly reported child mental health and self-esteem as being the most affected by poverty.

- > **65%** reported that poverty has a **high negative impact** on children's **mental health**.
- > **60%** reported that poverty has a **high negative impact** on children's **self-esteem**.



"[I am] seeing an increased number of children with mental health issues such as anxiety."

"Often parents suffer with mental health issues/ low self-esteem themselves which has a massive impact upon the children."

"[I see] the mental health impact of worrying about their parents and siblings due to low income."

"We have many children living in unsuitable environments, there are several who we have fought and fought to get Children's Social Care involved. We have noticed a significant change in the response and positive actions taken by Children's Social Care, leaving families without the support they desperately need. We believe this is also due to huge funding cuts but in our opinion has left a significant number of our children in inappropriate living environments and in situations detrimental to their wellbeing."

"[Children in poverty have] feelings of low self-esteem. [They are] unable to join in, [which leads to] feelings of exclusion, bad behaviour, [and] rebellious behaviours."

"[Children in poverty have] no access to extracurricular activities out of school, and a lack of experiences seeing the outside world as they never leave their home town...so [their] self-confidence is low as a result."

"We have noticed that recorded on our database there was an increase in the number of young children aged from aged 6 upwards needing counselling on a one to one basis and in a group setting."

"Children are receiving support for mental health as a direct result of their experiences."

Factors affecting the mental health of children in poverty

We asked respondents to what extent the following issues affect the mental health of the children that they support: family financial pressure, social isolation, lack of sleep, lack of exercise, bullying, and screen time. Family financial pressure was the most commonly reported issue to have a high negative impact on children's mental health, followed by a lack of sleep and social isolation.

The order of prevalence for factors having a large, negative impact on child mental health, as reported by respondents, is outlined below.

- > **58%** of respondents - family financial pressure
- > **54%** of respondents - not enough sleep
- > **53%** of respondents - social isolation
- > **45%** of respondents - bullying
- > **42%** of respondents - not enough exercise
- > **42%** of respondents - screen time

This extends findings outlined in our previous report on how children are affected by poverty; we already know that many children in poverty are living without an appropriate bed of their own to sleep in, and that families cannot afford after school activities or school uniform for the children. This demonstrates that poverty has a knock-on effect on many aspects of children's lives, which in turn can impact their mental health. The other factors are also directly linked to poverty.

Recap: The essentials

- > **67%** regularly see children (i.e. at least once a week) unable to attend **after school activities** due to the costs, and **12%** see this every day.
- > **55%** regularly see children (i.e. at least once a week) **without a bed of their own**, and **8%** see this every day.
- > **81%** regularly see families (i.e. at least once a week) unable to afford **new children's clothes**, and **18%** see this every day.

Additional factors affecting the mental health of children in poverty

We also gave the opportunity for respondents to highlight additional factors and experiences that they see as prominent in affecting the mental health of children and young people that they work with. Several themes came from the responses, highlighting the range of factors that support workers see contributing to children's mental health problems:

- > Family relationships
- > Parent mental health problems
- > School / education issues
- > Housing problems
- > Social media use / screen time
- > Children's roles of responsibility / being a carer
- > Peer pressure and peer relationship issues
- > A lack of intervention and available support
- > Drug-related problems
- > Crime and the wider environment

Family relationships

When asked to outline additional factors that our front-line professionals see impacting the mental health of the children supported by our respondents, **29% highlighted the salience of difficulties in family**. These family relationships included the relationship between parents, the parent-child relationship, sibling relationships and relationships with extended family members. The prevalence of many of these family issues were highlighted in our previous report which presented findings in relation to how often respondents work with children who have been exposed to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).

Of the respondents that highlighted family relationship issues as a factor that can impact children's mental health:

- > **41%** referred to **parenting / the parent-child relationship**
- > **51%** referred to the **relationship between parents** (i.e. couple relationships)
- > **17%** referred to **sibling relationships**
- > **10%** referred to the **extended family**

Respondents that stressed the link between poor parenting / parent-child relationships and child mental health problems gave a range of examples of how these relationships can lead to children's mental health problems. Examples include a general lack of parenting skills and an intergenerational cycle of poor parenting, and a lack of positive parent-child relationships (such as communication and play). Neglect was also a common theme, with several respondents reporting that they see children's mental health being impacted by parents who are unable to adequately care for their children as they are struggling to cope themselves. This includes being unable to provide necessities for the child, including nutritious meals. Several support workers saw that, due to parents' circumstances, parents and children are often unable to develop healthy attachments. Several respondents also noted that they have seen the impact of physical and emotional abuse on the mental health of children that they work with.



"Parents are unable to role model as they themselves are struggling to cope."

"Violence and abuse young people have experienced during their life... a lack of care or love in their life... [leads to] feelings of rejection."

"As parents are so stressed they are not emotionally available for their children, impacting on [children] in a negative way."

"[There is a] lack of understanding and education of parent and child relationships and spending time together, i.e. communication, play."

"Verbal or physical abuse at home is a big one"

"Bad parenting is often the main focus. The parents have not been parented properly and it is a continual circle."



Issues in the relationships between parents impacting on children's mental health were primarily mentioned in relation to parental separation, the absence of one parent and domestic violence. One aspect that was repeatedly noted as impacting on children's mental health was the distress caused by children having to flee domestic abuse: leaving behind their belongings, schools, friends and other support networks.



"[Children] have to flee domestic abuse and leaving behind personal belongings, family pets and extended family and friends. Starting over in new schools can be particularly stressful as well as...not being able to talk to new friends about why they have had school moves. Some children decide not to make friends as they don't know if they will be staying long in the area or have to flee again if dad finds them. These children experience acute stress reactions which affect them physically, psychologically, socially and behaviourally."

Recap: Couple and parent-child relationships

- > **62%** reported that **more than half** of the children they work with have experienced **emotional abuse**.
- > **33%** reported that **more than half** of the children they work with have experienced **physical abuse**.
- > **88%** reported that **more than half** of the children they support have experienced **parental separation**.
- > **67%** reported that **more than half** of the children they support have witnessed **domestic violence**.



Some discussed extended family and sibling relationships impacting children's mental health. These focused on the impact of neglect or mistreatment due to sibling mental health problems; difficult sibling relationships due to overcrowding and a lack of resources, and being unable to see extended family members when fleeing domestic abuse.

Buttle UK has previously conducted research which as shown how informal kinship care placements can provide very positive outcomes for children.¹ However, respondents did highlight the negative impact on children when these arrangements are not appropriate.



"Kinship care is not necessarily the best option for children, [but there is] no funding available for foster placements."

"A lack of extended family and community can have a negative impact."

"Stress [is] caused by [the] huge number of ACEs that children in Kinship placements experience."



1. *The poor relations: children and informal kinship carers speak out* (2013). Julie Selwyn, Elaine Farmer, Sarah Meakings and Paula Vaisey. University of Bristol

Parent mental health problems

Of the respondents that outlined additional factors that impact on children's mental health, **15% reported parental mental health problems as a prominent issue**. They reported that children's mental health can suffer when parents are too suffering from depression, and so unable to provide love and attention to the child. Children learn responses from watching parents' behaviours, and in turn display mental health issues (such as anxiety) themselves. The prevalence of this problem was highlighted in our previously published report, in which 85% of respondents reported that more than half of the children they work with have a parent or individual in the home with mental health problems. This shows the high rate of exposure to adult mental health problems that children in poverty are at risk of experiencing.



"Often, parents suffer with mental health issues/ low self-esteem themselves which has a massive impact upon the children."

"[Young people's mental health is impacted by] a lack of attention from parents because the parents are depressed. They learn behaviour such as anxiety and depression from parents who are depressed. [I have seen] numerous suicide attempts as a cry for help with little support. [There is a] poor handover from CAMHS to adult services. Often clients feel that all their support leaves at the same time especially for looked after children when the personal assistant also leaves them at 18."

"[The] mental health of their parents [means that there is] poor emotional support within the home, and poor attachment and bonding in the early months from birth."

"[Children] feel scared and anxious because of the abuse they have witnessed or been subjected to, [because of] police involvement, [and] having to attend meetings with agencies such as social workers. Not having a settled address, having to leave their home, belongings, toys, relatives, pets, school, siblings, father or mother [impacts them]."

Recap: Parent mental health problems

- > **85%** reported that **over half** of the children they support have parents or family members in the home experiencing **mental health problems**.

Drugs, alcohol misuse and crime

An additional factor that respondents highlighted as salient for children's mental health is **drug and alcohol issues and criminal activity; 13% highlighted these as experiences that can lead to problems for children**. It was commonly noted that parent alcohol and substance misuse impacts children's mental health, particularly when addictions prevent the parent from being able to provide and care for their child, and when children are forced into the role of a carer for their parent with addictions. Having to maintain relationships with perpetrators of domestic abuse was also noted as having an impact on children's mental health. On several occasions, respondents noted that children and young people's own drug use can lead to mental ill health. Moreover, general concerns of crime in the community and engagement in gangs as a result of a lack of support services were noted as prominent in child mental health problems.



"Parents with mental health issues, drug and alcohol dependency and also exposure to domestic violence contributes to a child's mental health."

"[I have] experience of some children becoming involved in crime/gangs due to lack of services e.g. youth clubs and lack of early intervention."

Recap: Addiction and crime

- > **53%** reported seeing an increase in children impacted by crime.
- > **54%** reported that parent alcohol abuse is present for more than half of the children they support.
- > **49%** reported that parent / family member drug use is present for more than half of the children they support.
- > **22%** reported that more than half of the children they support have experienced parent / family member imprisonment

Being a young carer

Linked to family relationships and parent mental health problems, **9%** of respondents highlighted that **being a young carer or feeling a sense of responsibility for the family can impact children's mental health.**

Respondents highlighted that in families where parents have mental health problems or addictions, and where there are family members with physical or educational health needs, children are often made to take the role of a carer. They noted that often there is a lack of support for these children, and there is a role reversal whereby they have to act as a parent rather than being cared for by their parents. Some referrers also noted that children in poverty more generally often feel responsible and concerned about parents' financial worries, that they see these issues impacting children's mental health.



"[Children's mental health is affected by] role reversal: a realisation that the adults around them are not coping and they feel a responsibility not to make it worse by sharing the impact of poverty on them as children, in school, with peers etc."

"Being a young carer [affects mental health], especially for those caring for a parent & with no other family support."

School / education issues

When asked about factors that can impact on children's mental health, **11%** **highlighted issues around schooling and education.** Some mentioned that children in poverty often have poor school attendance, which leads to children becoming more isolated and experiencing mental health problems as a result. Several also noted the high levels of pressure that children feel to perform well in exams, which can lead to higher levels of anxiety. Several noted that children with special educational needs can develop mental health problems when these needs are not met by schools. Others highlighted that there is a lack of pastoral support more generally in schools, or a lack of understanding of home circumstances. Linked to experiences of domestic violence, respondents also highlighted the negative impact that moving schools frequently to flee domestic violence can have on their mental health.



"[There is a] Lack of sensitivity towards young people experiencing bullying from education staff [and a] lack of sensitivity from criminal justice towards young people experiencing domestic abuse."

"Lack of school attendance directly feeds into isolation."

"[There is a] lack of support by mental health specialist in schools, [and a] Lack of understanding around mental health in schools."

"Pressure from school and exams, schools not understanding or being aware of stressors at home, and the lack of pastoral support in school for children and young people [affects mental health]."



These findings support and expand upon the findings presented in our earlier report on experiences of education for children in poverty, highlighting the strong link between poverty, access to education and mental health.

Relationships with peers

One key issue reported as impacting on child mental health is **problems with peer relationships, noted as a prominent issue in 9% of responses**. Respondents noted mental health, particularly low self-esteem and high levels of anxiety, can result from peer pressure to have certain items or behave in certain ways. Feeling different to peers due to not having the same technology or clothes was a factor mentioned on several occasions. Respondents also reported that children who have witnessed domestic violence and other ACEs may feel unable to develop strong relationships with peers, due to not being able to share these experiences or feel understood by peers. Related to this, children who move frequently to flee domestic abuse often do not attempt to develop meaningful relationships due to not knowing when they will next have to move and be separated from peers again. Stigma against living conditions and circumstances was also reported as having negatively impacted the mental health of children in poverty.



"[Mental health is impacted by] expectations of body image and needing to fit in with other young people, the pressure of being seen as "attractive" and also pressure to have sex when emotionally they do not feel ready."

"Constant moving of families who are living in temporary accommodation [means that children are unable to make lasting friendships due to being moved sometimes 3-4 times."

"An awareness of these issues that their peers may not be aware of affects insecurities."

Social media use

Linked to screen time and peer relationships, **10% of frontline professionals reported that social media and the pressure that come with this play a role in the mental health problems of the children they work with**. Lots of the above-mentioned peer pressure was reported to be through social media use, particularly in relation to body image, self-esteem, self-harm and eating disorders. Respondents also noted the link between a large amount of screen time, particularly online games that also provide a platform for cyber social interactions, and mental health by reducing physical interactions with family and friends, increasing levels of isolation, reducing exercise and producing a lack of sleep.



"Altercations over social media have caused serious issues across our schemes, which have led to police involvement and have left some individuals feeling isolated and victimised."

"Lack of sleep and not getting enough exercise is a massive problem... Parents understanding the need to limit screen time and have courage to do this is also a big issue."

"Peer pressure and social media are having a huge impact on young people's mental health. Self-harm and suicidal tendencies have hugely risen in number."

Housing Issues

Among responses to the question of additional impacting the mental health of the children, **11% indicated that housing problems play a role**. Of these, **38% highlighted that overcrowding** is a key issue, with factors such as being in a confined space with family members who are themselves experiencing mental health problems. Respondents also reported that they see poor mental health in the children affected by homelessness, as well as when there is a lack of basic provisions in the home; when the location of the home leads to isolation, and when children are in unstable accommodation and frequently moving.



"A part of this is due to overcrowding in the home. Parents and 2+ children [are] living in 1-bedroom properties, which can be made worse when 1 child has a SEN/diagnosis autistic, ADHD, etc."

"Children experience stress and anxiety when homeless, particularly when parents have been found intentionally homeless and they are hearing parents discussing that their children may be removed from their care. Parents think the child is asleep and as children and parents are all sharing one room it is difficult to ensure that they don't overhear."

"Poor and overcrowded accommodation impacts heavily. I am working with a few families now where children are falling asleep in class due to a) being disturbed by sibling with mental health/learning difficulties and b) overcrowded accommodation/noise issues/antisocial behaviour of neighbouring tenants."

We asked respondents specifically about the prevalence and severity of housing problems among the children and families that they support. In particular, was asked whether short term / changing tenancies; overcrowding; unsuitable / poorly maintained accommodation, and difficulties maintaining local support networks are common or rare, and have a significant or minor effect on children in poverty.

HOUSING ISSUES

- > **83%** rated **overcrowding** as a **common** problem.
- > **76%** rated **overcrowding** as a **significant** problem.

- > **85%** rated **unsuitable housing** as a **common** problem.
- > **77%** rated **unsuitable housing** as a **significant** problem.

- > **75%** rated **short-term / changing tenancies** as a **common** problem.
- > **70%** rated **short-term / changing tenancies** as a **significant** problem.

- > **88%** rated a **lack of local support networks** as a **common** problem.
- > **71%** rated a **lack of local support networks** as a **significant** problem.

When asked to expand on housing issues among children in poverty, several highlighted that children experiencing housing issues are often the children who are being affected by crime and mental health problems, and that parent mental health problems can exacerbate housing issues when they prevent parents from being able to cope with money management. Several noted that there are often high levels of antisocial behaviour in the buildings and areas in which children in poverty are placed. Respondents also highlighted that housing problems such as unstable / changing tenancies can lead to children losing their support networks, which can negatively impact their mental health.



"[Families having to] bid [on homes] results in long periods spent in temporary accommodation, overcrowding and lack of space and toys for children to play. Frequent moving is significantly disruptive and families are often changing GPs, dentists, schools and lack consistency of service."

"I work with young people made homeless... due to arguments at home, some to do with parents drinking, sometimes because of the young person's smoking cannabis or other criminal activity, [but] mostly due to abuse at home."

"There is a lack of funding for clients with no recourse to public funds within the domestic abuse sector, meaning that women are often unable to access safe accommodation within a refuge."

"Security is an issue where changes in benefits have meant changes in rent being paid and so families who had been ok before have ended up in debt/arrears. This has been particularly difficult with families where the parent has difficulties with their mental health or if their situation is overwhelming already and they hadn't realised or known how to deal with it."

"People with mental health issues are unable to deal with money issues and no help [is] given to them by the council as they fail to understand mental health."

"our service users report fighting, drug use and general drunken behaviour that makes them feel unsafe in the area they live in. Unfortunately, the nature of social housing means you are more likely to be homed beside people with these challenging behaviours."



Concluding remarks

Together, these findings demonstrate the alarmingly common occurrence of experiences that put children at an increased risk of mental health problems, and in turn, demonstrate the need to provide mental health support to vulnerable children across the UK.

Findings indicate that providing children in poverty with the right support to ensure that they have a safe, healthy, well-equipped home and living environment, that they have access to education and social activities that promote wellbeing and personal development, is crucial to providing the foundations for positive mental health for children and young people. These are all areas in which Buttle UK's *Chances for Children* grants provide direct funding support.



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