THE STATE OF CHILD POVERTY 2020

Executive Summary

The Impact of Covid-19 on Families and Young People living in poverty

Amelia Smith, PhD, Impact and Evaluation Manager, Buttle UK

Richard Barron, Director of Marketing and Fundraising Buttle UK

Introduction

Overview

This report provides a unique insight into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic inside the homes of some of the most vulnerable families in the UK.

This qualitative study of nearly 1000 nationwide frontline workers was carried out at the point lockdown restrictions started being lifted in June 2020 and is based on a survey of support workers who have been interacting daily with families throughout the crisis.

Clearly, the pandemic has changed everything. All our lives are different as a result, but these were families that were struggling anyway. Not all families were equal going into the crisis and they are certainly not equal coming out. The issues discussed in this report provide one of the most graphic examples of what the real impact of the crisis has been and indicates what is to come unless we act.

The report is more than statistics on child poverty. While it reinforces data seen elsewhere (i.e. increased unemployment, Universal Credit applications, food bank usage etc.), what it provides is first-hand, direct experience of what frontline workers have witnessed from their interactions with families.

This is the second time we have run this survey. Last year's findings described how poverty manifests itself in the daily lives of children and young people. A year later, and this report shows just how much COVID-19 and lockdown have exacerbated these existing issues. The timing of this report as lockdown restrictions began to be lifted is important. The survey contains information about experiences during lockdown, but also thoughts and concerns about the future as we come out of lockdown and enter the "new normal".

Recognising the huge financial burden the pandemic will place on the UK in the future, this study sets out to explore the profound issues families have faced during the crisis and offer some recommendations to tackling these Issues as we enter the next phase of the crisis.

This executive summary focuses on how the COVID-19 crisis has impacted children and young people's access to basic items, education and mental health. The full report provides more detail on these issues; an eye-opening narrative through a plethora of quotes from frontline workers, and a bigger picture of the struggles that families and young people in crisis face day-to-day, beyond COVID-19.

The Respondents

This survey was targeted at frontline practitioners who work directly with children, families and young people in crisis across the UK. All individuals asked to complete the survey have applied for grants from Buttle UK, either through the emergency essentials programme that ran until 2018 (now run by Family Fund), or through Buttle UK's current Chances for Children programme.

Over 900 respondents completed the survey across all nations and regions in the UK. All respondents work in professions that provide support to families and young people in crisis. The biggest group were individuals working in statutory social services (47%), followed by individuals in the voluntary sector (32%). The remaining 21% of respondents were in the housing, education or public health sectors.

UK distribution of responses:

	4%
	6%
	7%
	8%
	9%
	11%
	13%
	14%
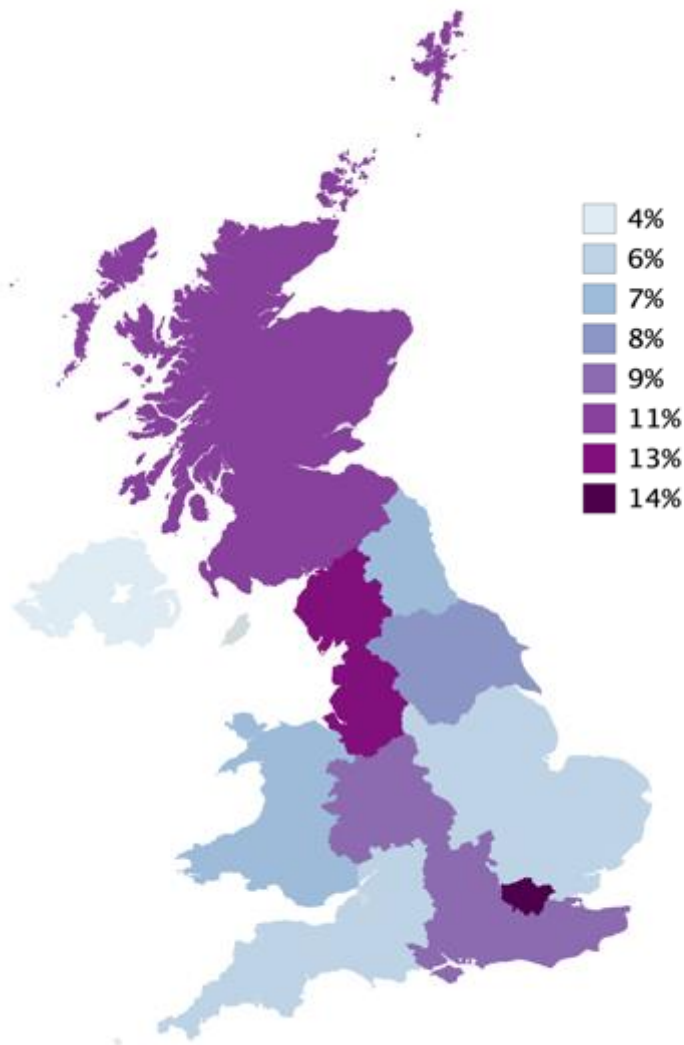
COVID-19 and ACEs

The impact of COVID-19 on Adverse Childhood Experiences

To provide a background to the families that are discussed throughout this report, we asked respondents to report the percentage of children and young people they work with who have had exposure to specific adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs are widely identified as family situational factors that impact on children's development and life chances through to adulthood.

> **Already impoverished families who may have relied a lot on the support of other family members/friends/organisations suddenly found themselves unable to access a lot of this support. In turn, those who felt isolated in general find that this has increased greatly during the lockdown period. Those who may use alcohol as a coping mechanism have found that they have been turning to it more and more as a result of the current situation.**

There is a high prevalence of ACEs among children receiving frontline support

> Over **half** of frontline workers' clients have experienced family separation, mental illness in the home, verbal abuse, domestic violence and neglect.
> Over **a third** of children receiving frontline support have experienced physical abuse and have been exposed to drug and alcohol misuse.
> **A fifth** of these children have had a family member in prison and experienced sexual abuse.

> **Poverty is a huge contributor to these issues as these families are living in overcrowded homes with little space from each other. They are on low incomes/benefits which adds financial stress on the parents, leading to arguments and domestic violence. The stress of the situation also leads parents to develop mental health difficulties, especially depression, and in turn these all contribute to children being neglected.**
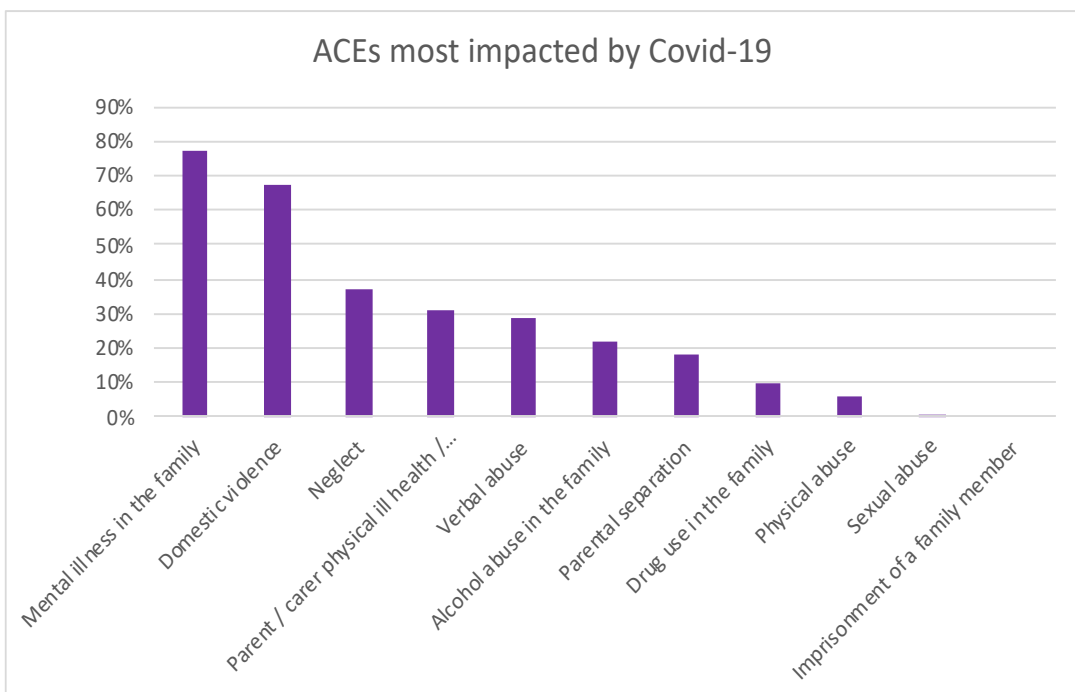
COVID-19 and ACEs

> **Children are not able to access out of home activities, they are not eating a healthy and balanced diet. Some are experiencing a lack of warmth and love from their parents owing to parental stress factors. Some children have been removed from the care of their parents during lock down due to safeguarding issues. Parents' stress levels could contribute to more children witnessing domestic violence**

The ACEs most impacted by COVID-19

During the pandemic, a shocking number of children have been further exposed to ACEs, coupled with an increased difficultly in receiving any kind of support for what they have faced. Respondents reported that the three ACEs that have had the biggest increases in instances and severity are:

> **77%** - mental health problems
> **67%** - domestic abuse
> **40%** - child neglect

ACEs most impacted by Covid-19

ACE	Percentage
Mental illness in the family	77%
Domestic violence	67%
Neglect	37%
Parent / carer physical ill health / ...	31%
Verbal abuse	29%
Alcohol abuse in the family	22%
Parental separation	18%
Drug use in the family	10%
Physical abuse	6%
Sexual abuse	1%
Imprisonment of a family member	0%

COVID-19 and Employment

The need for financial support – working poverty

To find out the extent to which COVID-19 has impacted the financial situation and employment of vulnerable families across the UK, we asked frontline workers to report the percentage of families they work with who live in destitution and have had changes to their employment circumstances. It is not the case that families living in poverty do not work, rather, working is simply not enough to stop families struggling financially.
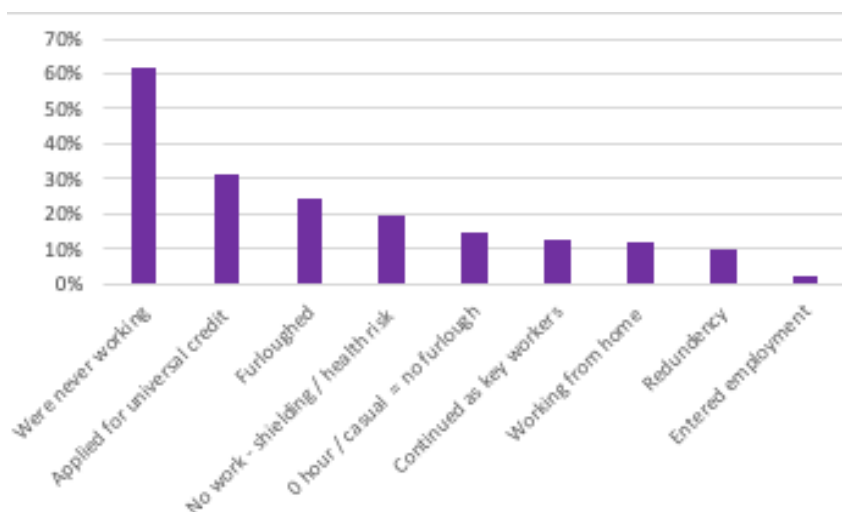
For families who are receiving frontline support:

> **40%** are living in destitution
> Prior to COVID-19, **38%** were in employment
> Over **40%** of families who have at least one member in employment still need financial support
> **20%** of families with two adults in employment still need financial support

During COVID-19:

> Over **30%** have had to submit a new universal credit application
> **25%** have been furloughed
> **25%** have either been impacted by 0-hour contracts or lost their job
> Only **3%** have entered employment

Whilst the **25%** of families being furloughed is in line with the general population under the furlough scheme,[1] the reported **10%** of vulnerable families losing their jobs is over 20-fold higher than the 0.4% general redundancy population,[2] and the proportion of people reported to be on zero hour and casual contracts is **five times** higher than the 3% of the total population.[3]

[1]HMRC Job Retention Scheme Statistics, [2]ONS Redundancy Statistics, July 2020, [3]ONS 0-hour contract statistics, February 2020

COVID-19 and Access to the Basics

When asked how COVID-19 has impacted families with regards to accessing the basics, the most common issues that arose were being able to afford and access food, accessing support and being isolated, difficulties with accessing the items needed to engage in education, parents' capacity to home-school children, and affording rent and bills.

COVID-19 has increased the need for support:

> **83%** of frontline workers have seen an increase in need for foodbanks
> **64%** have seen an increase in need for local authority welfare assistance

The percentage of families receiving frontline support that cannot access essentials:

> **57%** cannot afford essential household items (whitegoods, appliances, basic furniture)
> **47%** are unable to afford food
> **40%** are unable to afford clothes, rent, gas and electric, or the things needed to keep a clean home.
> **27%** of children do not have access to a proper bed to sleep in.

When asked which basic item has the biggest impact on children, not having access to food was seen as being the most detrimental for children's mental health (**42%**) and education (**33%**).

Despite the number of families struggling to afford the basics and the very high percentage of frontline workers seeing an increase need for support, a much lower proportion have seen increases in the availability of support, showing support is not increasing at the level needed to meet this new demand:

> **61%** have seen an increase in availability of foodbanks
> Only **36%** have seen an increase in local welfare assistance

"

Children have been trapped at home with no stimulation, with no respite from parental issues. Costs have risen and without support parents couldn't even get to the shops. Fuel bills increased and families went without water to wash as they could not afford to heat it

COVID-19 and Child Mental Health

> " Children I am working with have informed me they feel ashamed going without basic needs being met. Children see their mother/ father struggling to get money for food, gas and electricity to heat the home. This has a big impact on their mental health, stopping them from sleeping, and some tell me they go without so their younger sibling can eat a hot meal

COVID-19 has significantly impacted the mental health and behaviour of children living in poverty. Being unable to leave often ill-equipped homes, with little in the way of stimulating activities or the opportunity to play with friends has had a huge impact on children's mental health. Struggling to afford basics such as food, and parents not having any down time away from their children, has led to increased tensions in many families. These are family situations that were already under stress before the lockdown, with children experiencing a variety of adverse childhood experiences that have been exacerbated by the crisis.

COVID-19 has increased mental health and family relationship issues:

> **84%** of frontline workers have seen increases in children and young people's mental health problems
> **75%** have seen an increase in behaviour problems
> **74%** have seen an increase in parent-child relationship difficulties
> **77%** have seen an increase in need for mental health support

When asked how mental health and family relationships have been impacted by COVID-19, the most common reasons were: being unable to access the support that they would normally be receiving; being stuck at home in confined spaces and ill-equipped homes; being unable to engage in education or socialise with peers, and; not having enough stimulating activities or things to do during lockdown.

On a positive note - frontline workers did note that families have used lockdown to build more positive relationships after trauma and that children have felt less pressure from peers by not having to attend school, with less evidence of online bullying/trolling:

> **7%** have seen a decrease in parent-child relationship difficulties
> **10%** have seen a decrease in peer relationship difficulties

COVID-19 and Access to Education

> **It has been almost impossible. The children I work with benefit from structure and routine and school provides this. Often, parents have mental health issues and being with their kids 24/7 is very challenging so they seek to alleviate their stress by not challenging their children to do homework. Also, some parents are unable to help their children through their own educational limitations. Promises from the Scottish government on providing IT equipment have failed to materialise and it is only through Buttle UK providing electronic equipment that some of my families have been able to engage in online learning at all.**

Barriers to homeschooling in poverty

When it came to the effect of COVID-19 and the biggest challenges of home-schooling, the biggest barrier was digital access. Frontline workers highlighted that many families share or have no computers in the home, no broadband, or insufficient internet speed. Children are unable to download coursework, have no access to printers and no quiet space to learn. Respondents also stated that many children are trying to access their schoolwork through parents' phones, as this is often the only form of digital equipment in the home.

Frontline workers reported that they have seen parents struggle to homeschool multiple children who are all at different stages of the curriculum and learning different things, that parent mental health problems can prevent parents from being able to homeschool children, and that parents' own education and English language barriers can make it difficult to homeschool their children.

The percentage of respondents rating these issues as the biggest barrier to homeschooling:

> **26%** - digital access
> **24%** - parent mental health problems as the barrier
> **12%** - parent literacy, education and English language difficulties
> **14%** - multiple children across age groups with different educational needs

> **All of the above have contributed to home schooling difficulties; lack of access to laptops/PCs/printers has been a big issue, [as well as] parental mental health problems [and] children with challenging behaviour. All of the families we work with are in need of support for a number of different reasons and COVID-19 has put added pressure [on families].**

COVID-19 and Access to Education

The challenges with homeschooling were clear. When asked how children's education has been impacted by COVID-19, **15% of respondents noted (unprompted) specifically that children have not been homeschooled at all** during the lockdown period.

Respondents stated that a lack of electronic equipment not only prevents children from completing schoolwork but has also been a huge barrier to peer relationships (an important part of a child's development) – children cannot socialise online with their peers and have been cut off from the outside world even more so than other children. They reported that parents have been affected by not having the respite they would normally have when children are at school, which has impacted on their mental health and in turn the home learning environment. Some pointed out that families and children in poverty often have additional educational needs that require 1-to-1 support, which simply cannot be met in overcrowded homes or without professional expertise.

Respondents felt that having months out of education, living in chaotic environments with disrupted routines, and receiving no formal education will make it very difficult for children to adjust back to routines within school. Many frontline workers are concerned that it will be impossible to catch up with the missed schoolwork, or that children will be too anxious after falling behind to attend school, further increasing the educational divide between classes. It will be difficult for children adjusting to a "new normal" where the school environment is not something it once was, with smaller class sizes and COVID-19 distancing measures.

> **36%** of respondents said that there would be barriers around getting back into a structured routine
> **30%** reported that there would be issues around gaps in schooling and catching up
> **19%** of frontline workers are also concerned about the safety elements of returning to school

Many children don't have a private place to complete work, never mind access to IT and electronic equipment. We have parents who are illiterate, or their literacy is very limited, which then means their children are having very little encouragement to learn. There has not been consistency within schools regarding food vouchers, with some families being provided with a basic sandwich and piece of fruit each day and therefore [given] no opportunity for a warm dinner as they would have had at school.

Conclusions and Recommendations

For many children and young people, the pandemic has only amplified the difficulties that already existed in their lives, increasing their isolation and forcing them to spend many hours in homes that lack the bare essentials and comforts most other children take for granted.

One thing this report demonstrates above all else is that the problems facing the most vulnerable children and young people are not isolated, they face a range of issues which are interconnected. An increase in pressure on one or more impacts others, and the crisis has done this on a number of fronts all at once. The net result is that children and young people are going to struggle more than ever over the coming years. We should feel troubled by the fact that children are not having their basic needs met in our country. The crisis has made these issues clearer than ever, which begs the question: if we are to take decisive action then 'if not now, when'?

Buttle UK are currently working nationwide with frontline workers to distribute a COVID-19 Response fund of £5m to help vulnerable children. We are doing this by providing 'Chances for Children' grants of up £2,000. The average grant during the crisis though, has been around £1,200. This is a relatively small financial intervention, but where we have seen it has its power is by paying for a range of items and costs, which form a holistic solution to the range of issues a family faces. We do this by working in combination with local support services and target the funds to support the outcomes they too are looking to achieve for children and young people. It is a very practical response tailored to the specific needs of the family, and it involves collaboration between statuary and voluntary sectors. We believe that there is much in this approach that can be applied more broadly.

As the UK attempts a recovery from the crisis, there are going to be some very big challenges facing the most vulnerable sectors in our society. The crisis has demonstrated the huge value of our public services, and how communities are able to come together to support those that are most vulnerable within them. Harnessing these things is what we would hope to see in any plans for the recovery from the crisis.

However, children should also be at the heart of these plans. There has been no dedicated child poverty strategy for many years now. We therefore support the call from the End Child Poverty Coalition for the Government to set out a clear and ambitious strategy on reducing child poverty. But we are not asking the Government to do this all themselves. Many of us across the charity and public sectors are working alone to support issues where there is a better chance that we can tackle the interconnected problems children and young people face if we can find new ways to come together. The financial pressures on the UK coming out of the crisis makes this way of working more important than ever.

Conclusions and Recommendations

We also believe that the private sector has an important contribution to make, despite the likelihood of an ongoing financial downturn. We call on it to be pro-active in its response and where it can offer resources and the potential for innovation, we need to harness them. Take just one example. An aspect of the growing 'digital divide' is internet access. Broadband packages are usually out of reach to low-income families who cannot commit to, or afford, two-year contacts, let alone pass the strict credit checks. They also move around more than better off families, and often live in temporary accommodation where internet access is challenging. Buttle UK are currently working with a national broadband provider to look at a solution to this, just one way in which the private and charitable sector can come together to find imaginative solutions.

We must think creatively, and we must act collectively. But most importantly, we must act now. It is the only way we are going to make a dent in these seemingly intractable issues and prevent a lost generation.

Buttle UK is therefore calling for a new, national child poverty strategy; lead by the Government, but involving the charity, private sector and public sectors. From the findings of this report, we would hope to see the following issues addressed in this strategy:

> Support for children as they go back to school that looks beyond just catching up academically, with additional focus on their wellbeing. The use of targeted, tailored funds, like Chances for Children grants, can support this.
> New, longer terms solutions to the 'digital divide'.
> Initiatives that bring together charities, the public and private sectors to find ways to collectively tackle the issues facing the most vulnerable families.

About Buttle UK

Buttle UK provides financial assistance in the form of Chances for Children grants directly to families struggling in the UK. The grants are designed to give children a chance in life. They are based on the principle that a relatively small, tailored package of financial support, alongside existing service delivery, can have an impact far beyond its monetary value. Over the last 67 years, Buttle UK have demonstrated clearly how these small interventions can help improve children young people's life chances, and we believe that understanding this principle has the potential to save state money in the long term.

We will provide nearly £5 million in individual grants to children and young people affected by the COVID-19 crisis this year alone, preventing thousands of children from falling further into crisis and giving opportunities for children to thrive.

Whether Buttle UK gives a bed to a child who has been sleeping on the floor, counselling to a young boy or girl who has fled an abusive home with their mother; or a laptop to support a homeless teenager to begin their first college course, our direct, efficient and intelligent grants always focus on the needs of the individual children or young people. Families and young people are recommended for grants of up to £2,000 by a range of organisations, including social services, charities, housing associations and schools – the people who provided the insights contained within this report.

Buttle UK was established in 1953 following the death of Frank Buttle, an East End clergyman, who raised nearly £1m to help launch children out of poverty. Since then, the money has been carefully invested, meaning that the charity can cover its own administration costs. Therefore, 100% of any monies raised goes directly to giving children a chance for change.

www.buttleuk.org
@buttleuk