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THE STATE OF CHILD POVERTY 2020

Full Report

The Impact of COVID-19 on Families and Young People Living in Poverty

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Introduction

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 full report provides more detail on the issues highlighted in the executive summary, It provides a detailed picture of the basic essentials many children in poverty have to go without; the adversities and trauma they have to cope with; how children and young people in poverty have an unequal access to education now more than ever, and how all of these difficulties have a massive detrimental impact on children and young people's mental health. This report also contains an eye-opening narrative provided through a plethora of quotes from frontline workers, which highlight struggles those in poverty face in general, and how COVID-19 has made lives more difficult than ever.

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 all 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. Figure 1 shows where in the UK respondents are based, demonstrating that all nations and regions in the UK are represented throughout this report.

Figure 1. Regional breakdown of respondents
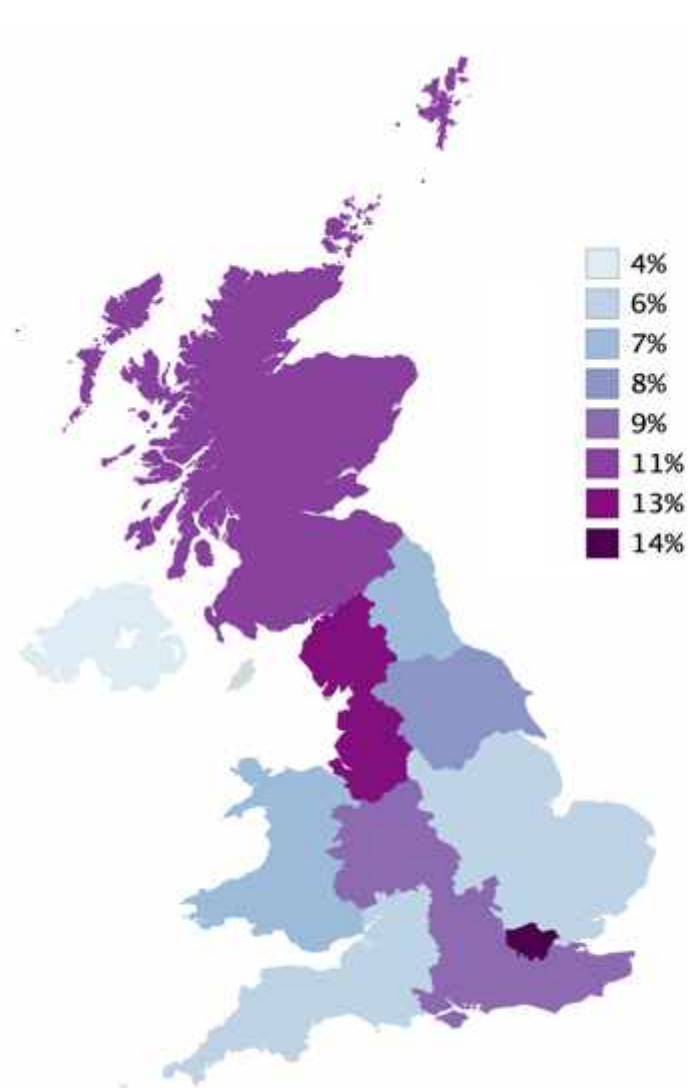
To understand who these frontline workers are supporting, we asked the field in which respondents work (social services, voluntary sector, housing, education or public health). Figure 2 shows a breakdown of the fields in which respondents work to provide support to families and young people in crisis. The biggest group was individuals working in social services, who made up 47% of respondents, followed by individuals in the voluntary sector, accounting for 32% of responses. The remaining 21% of respondents were in the housing, education or public health sector.

Figure 2. Respondents' field of work
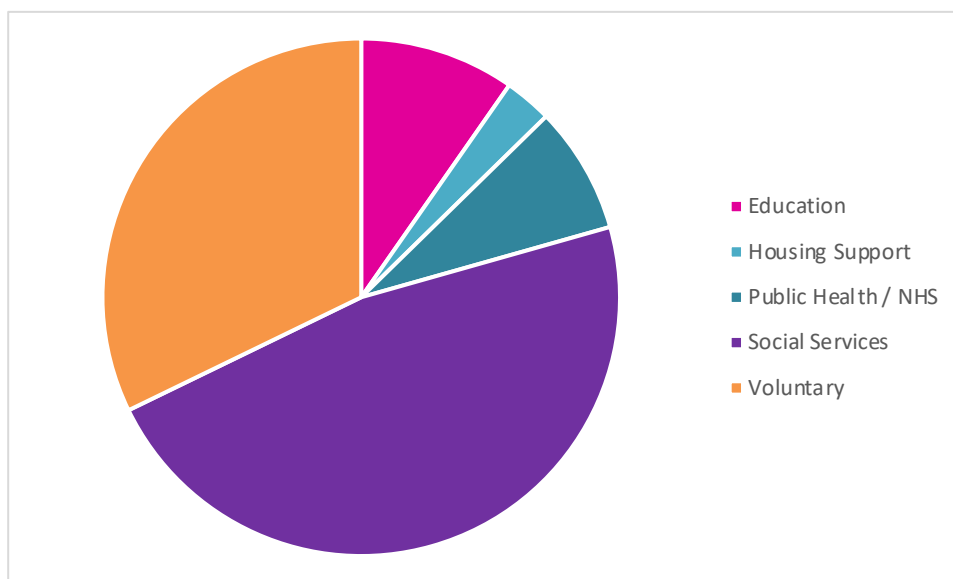
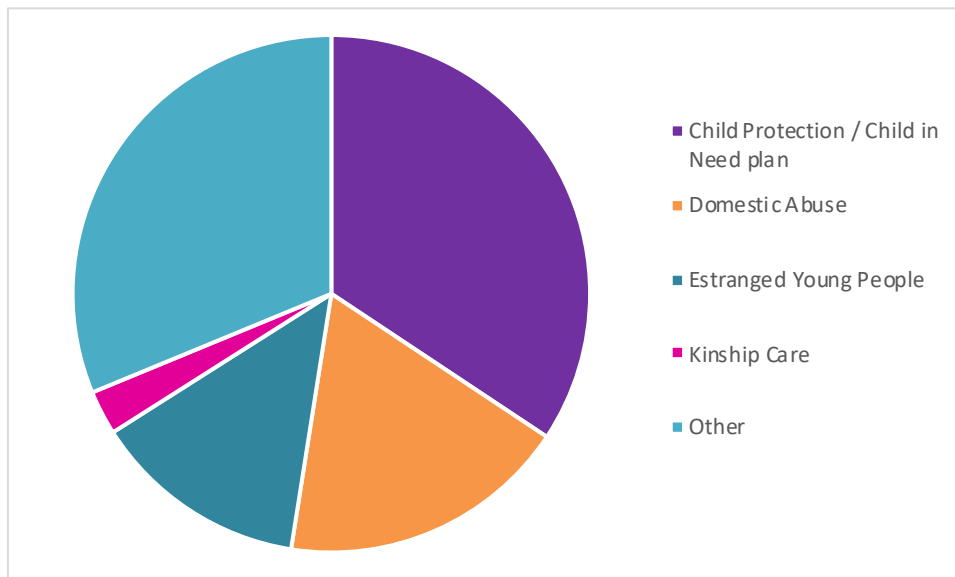We also asked respondents to report their key client group. Due to Buttle UK's key client groups being children who have been emotionally impacted by domestic abuse, kinship care families and estranged young people, we included these as key client groups, in addition to children on Child in Need / Child Protection plans, and "other". Figure 3 shows the key client groups respondents work with. The biggest proportion of respondents (34%) work with children on Child Protection or Child in Need plans. Over 30% of respondents fell into the "other" category, and primarily indicated that they cover a broader range of vulnerable children, young people and families as opposed to one client group. The remaining 35% of families reported that their key client groups fall into domestic abuse, estranged young people or kinship care, with the latter making up the smallest proportion of responses (3%).

Figure 3. Respondents' key client group

Legend:
- Child Protection / Child in Need plan
- Domestic Abuse
- Estranged Young People
- Kinship Care
- Other

The families, children, and young people – Adverse Childhood Experiences

To provide a background to the families that are discussed throughout responses, 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.[1] The main ACEs identified throughout literature and practice are parental separation, mental health problems, child verbal abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse, child neglect, alcohol misuse, drug abuse and parent incarceration. In some areas, physical ill health and disability in the family is also recognised as an adverse experience that can have long-term detrimental effects on children's life chances. It is widely evidenced that children who experience four or more ACEs are more likely to grow up to have mental health issues, poorer academic attainment, lower socioeconomic status, and are more likely to engage in risk behaviours such as alcohol and drug abuse and risky sexual behaviour.[2] Whilst the literature tends to focus on the impact of four or more ACEs, these experiences provide a good background to understanding what children and young people in poverty and crisis have to endure from a young age.

"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."

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"They sometimes can require interventions and engagements with multiple services including health, housing, education, financial and family support workers. Access and engagement to these interventions/services can be an issue and sometimes children and young people don't have the resources or the social, emotional or practical support to counter the negative effects of ACEs. Children and young people can carry trauma into their adult life and it can affect their mental health, relationships and choices."

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[1] Adverse Childhood Experiences – Scottish Government Background Report, June 2020
[2] Early Intervention Foundation (2020) – Adverse Childhood Experiences – What we know, what don't we know and what should we know?

A shocking number of children have experienced different ACEs. Results are shown in Figure 4. Over 50% 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. This demonstrates just how much trauma children in need of support have had to deal with early in their lives, as well as highlighting the vulnerability of the families discussed in this report and many of the children and young people supported by Buttle UK.

Figure 4. The percentage of children exposed to specific ACEs.
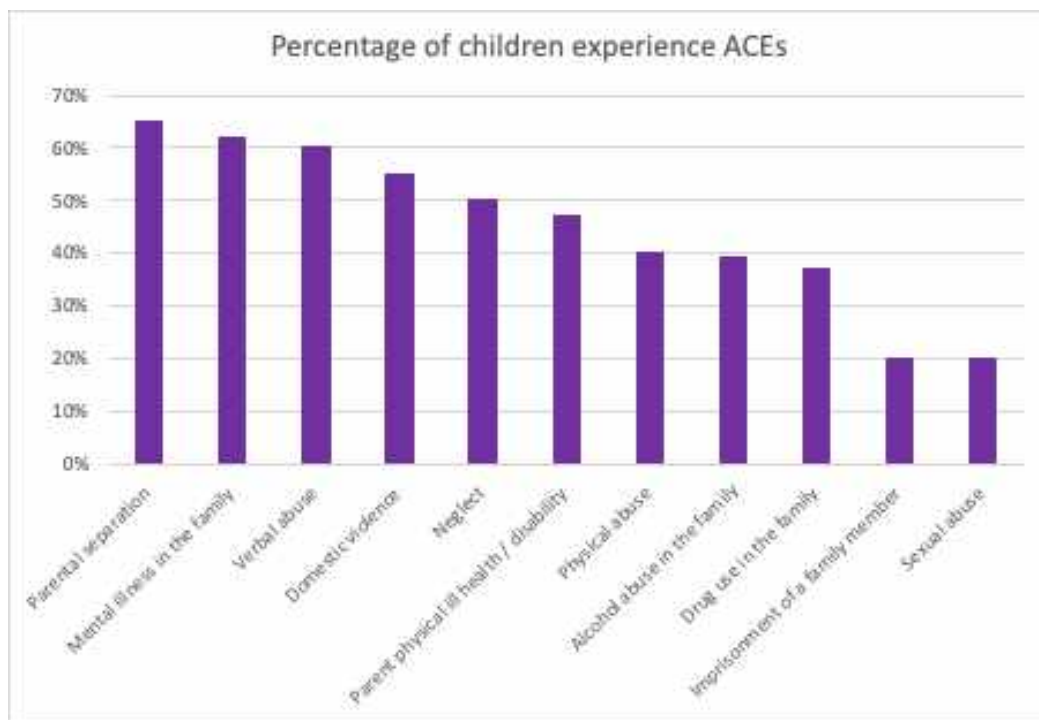
Poverty, ACEs and COVID-19

We asked respondents to outline whether and how they see ACEs being linked to poverty, and one of the key themes to arise was that poverty exacerbates these issues. Respondents highlighted how ACEs and poverty are directly linked to the issues that are documented throughout this report. Children who have been or are currently experiencing the adversities outlined above are likely to have difficulty accessing housing and basic essentials. ACEs and difficulties accessing the basics can lead to poorer children outcomes including: poor mental health; peer relationships; education; life chances and opportunities for achieving. Being in poverty and living with non-coping parents means that frontline support workers' efforts often go to ensuring that children have access to basics, which limits their capacity provide the additional support needed to address the trauma children face through ACEs.

"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."

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"If the parent or carer is unable to provide basic care needs regularly, it often falls upon family and or services to provide for the children, some children become carers themselves…the time and effort goes on trying to provide the basics, leaving less resources to look into other aspects of a child's wellbeing such as education, mental health [and] relationships."

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"It makes everything at least 10 times worse. When you have no money for anything and are dependent on others (e.g. charity), you feel like you are such a failure. This impacts on the children as they see fighting at home, they are hungry and often left to self-parent. They develop a sense of low self-esteem."

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"Many of the families I work with live hand to mouth and do not see any future ahead of them, they feel stuck in their current situation and struggle to have a vision for the future without their issues. Living in poverty exacerbates these issues."

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"Poverty creates anxiety, depression and a lack of self-worth - it adds extreme pressure on families, and this impacts on behaviour. Poor emotional regulation leads to uncontained anger, abusive behaviour, substance misuse [and] self-harm. Children live with, see, hear, experience and respond to these things every day - poverty exacerbates everything."

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"Poverty is just an added factor to these vulnerable children's and young people's lives, making it harder to be part of a society that will accept them as who they are. These children are very disadvantaged to the point that they lose their identity in all this."

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"Families see these as normal, or acceptable… their social norms are so firmly attached that it's hard to draw them away from this normal and enlighten them about staying safe or protecting their children... many families are resistant of help and support as this is all they have ever known."

"Whether young people are 'thriving' or not, I see an intrinsic sadness and heaviness with the majority of the young people I have worked with. They never know when the next difficult situation will arise and the expectation of that creates anxiety and unhelpful coping mechanisms. The majority struggle with relationships and committing to things long term, many are aspirational but there are a few who have no plans for their future at all."

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"Where parents struggle the most there is a ripple effect and the young people suffer the reverberations. [There is] alcohol misuse, arguments, [and] already struggling relationships [are] boiling over. Poverty means people have to stay together, choices for change are so limited, space is a premium, [there is] overcrowding, [and] poor surroundings affect self-esteem and outlook."

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"Poverty impacts children and young people in all areas of their lives; these children's school attendance is usually poor, compounded by parental separation, domestic violence, parental mental health, parental alcohol/substance misuse leads to chronic neglect and very negative outcomes by the time they reach the age of 18."

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"Poverty affects parents' mental health negatively which may also be comorbid with physical health issues. This puts more pressure and responsibility on the children in the house and has a negative impact on their mental health as a result. They often exhibit signs of anxiety and anxiety related conditions."

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"It impacts across all areas of the child and young person's life. They are disadvantaged from the outset with poorer parental attachments/bonds. It affects brain development due to increased cortisol and poor nutrition. Poverty impacts on parenting which can affect children's self-esteem and self-image, which in turn creates feelings of worthlessness. Poverty is stigma forming which impacts on their relationships, school attendance, school performance, with potential [for] bullying… We recognise that children living in poverty present with poor emotional regulation and behavioural issues. Their lives are more stressful and unstable compared to their peers [who are] not living in such difficult circumstances. This will affect their emotional health and wellbeing, causing poorer health outcomes, which will impact negatively on their future outcomes!"

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"Families have little disposable income. Therefore, children have less opportunity to access activities outside the home. Financial stress on families takes over parents' thoughts, leaving little patience with the children, and additional mental health issues arising. Arguments between couples around their finances, and children wanting items their peers have access to puts further strain on parents."

"[Children] sometimes can require interventions and engagements with multiple services including health, housing, education, financial and family support workers. Access and engagement to these interventions/services can be an issue and sometimes children's and young people don't have the resources or the social, emotional or practical support to counter the negative effects of ACEs.   Children and young people can carry trauma into their adult life and it can affect their mental health, relationships and choices."

Table 1. Percentage of qualitative responses containing themes for how poverty impacts ACEs.

Theme	%	Theme	%
Mental health / wellbeing	28%	Stress / pressure	15%
"Parent"	25%	Access	12%
Exacerbating	21%	Finances	12%
Housing	21%	Peer relationships	10%
Food	20%	Confidence / self-esteem	8%
Support / isolation	18%	Development / attainment	8%
Essential items	17%	Opportunities	7%
Education	17%	Activities	7%

Many also highlighted how these issues have been made worse and are having an even bigger impact on children during the COVID-19 pandemic. To find out how the additional difficulty and disruption of COVID-19 affects children in households where there is already so much trauma, we asked respondents to choose the three ACEs that have been most impacted by COVID-19.

The three ACEs that frontline workers have seen increases in as a result of COVID-19, both in terms of instances and severity, are:

- **77%** - mental health problems

- **67%** - domestic abuse

- **40%** - child neglect

Figure 5. Percentage of respondents rating top three ACEs being impacted by COVID-19.
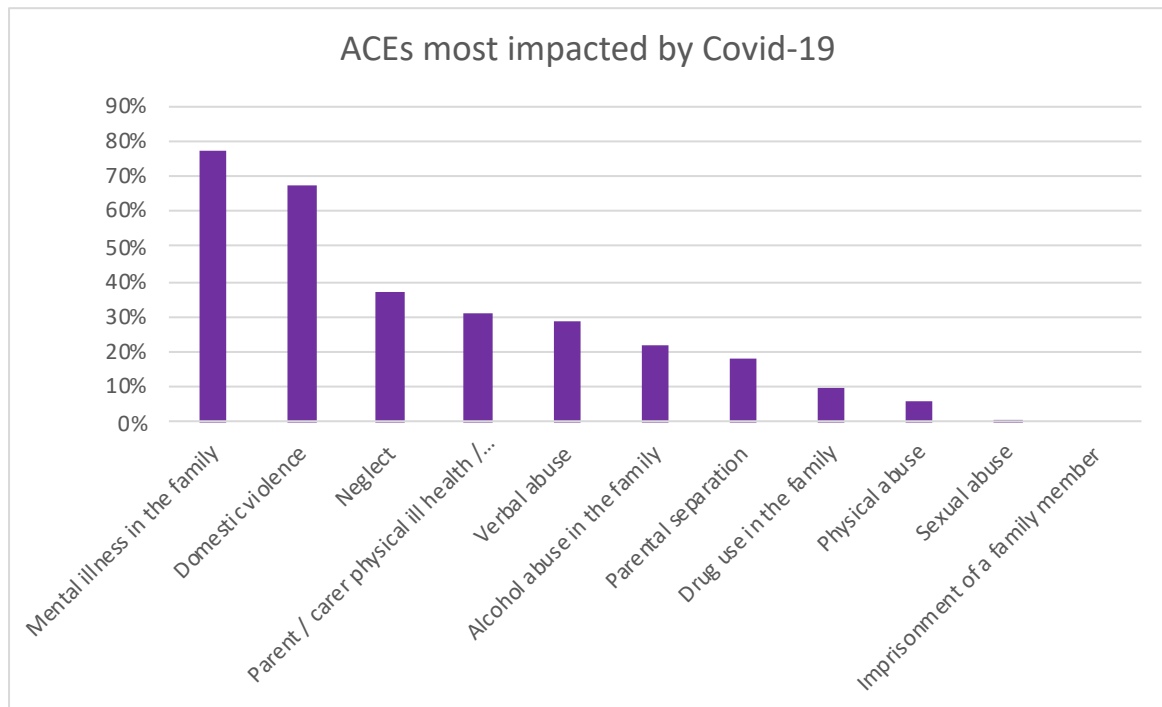
Respondents indicated that during lockdown many children have not had their basic needs met and that ACEs have risen due to the additional financial strain during lockdown. Being stuck at home with limited resources has led to parent mental health problems increasing, and more parents and carers turning back to alcohol as a means of coping with the current situation. Domestic abuse cases have been rising due to tensions in the home, and there are generally more difficulties in relationships. Frontline workers have found it very difficult to provide support to address the issues that children face as a result of these adversities during lockdown. Several also highlighted how school is often a safe haven from the adversities children face at home, and this simply has not been available to children – they have been stuck in these difficult circumstances and challenging home environments 24-7.

"Children are more at risk of witnessing and experiencing Domestic abuse. We have seen a large increase in families fleeing and becoming homeless due to Domestic abuse. They are living with parents who are very depressed and anxious. They have had not had their needs met at all, whether physically or emotionally. Their educational needs have certainly not been met. They have been seen as a problem as they are costing more due to being at home and have had no escape. The older children feel a burden and have experienced poor mental health and their behaviour has deteriorated."

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"Poverty has made the situation more difficult for some. Having no money to go out and buy food or pay bills has been challenging. They have been unable to get craft [materials] and resources to use to learn at home, and in some cases access to toys [is] very limited. The arguments in households due to being locked down with each other has escalated with no one having any respite."

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"Poverty limits choice, a life without choice suffocates the imagination… A clean warm home, a bed of your own, good quality food every day and carers who are not stressed and worried about paying the bills allows parents and children to enjoy one another more. Laughter does not feel like a luxury. Families can play together and enjoy positive experiences instead of everything being a challenge and a frustration. During lockdown I have taken families to the park, I had time to do this... that has a been a great luxury for me as a worker during the lock down...I can support outdoor activity that gives parents and children simple but positive time together. Just getting a bus off of the estate for a mother and her family is £8, they don't have £8 to spare."

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"Families who are facing material poverty are more likely to suffer heightened stress levels, this has escalated during COVID-19 as families are unable to distance themselves from each other when things are bad. Children and parents are not having the respite of going to school or work or even staying with grandparents."

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"Poverty affects the families we work with and this has an effect on all the ACES, and all have been exacerbated by COVID-19."

"The children have no safe place to go. When school was open, they could be seen and supported. Now they are at home and often home is not the safe place. They have no other people to talk to."

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"The parents are under immense stress just now while trying to keep their children at home. [Parents are] trying to manage fuel bills as they increase with more people at home during the day, [and] food costs as they have to plan, buy and make meals three times a day. Then the stress of home schooling on top of this has an increased negative effect on tempers, resulting in low mood within the home."

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"When parents (any parents) have to spend 24 hours per day with their children it can be stressful. When you factor in the poverty our families already experience, it becomes a big worry how they are going to manage. They also know that their children are falling behind in education but feel powerless to stop this as they are either not educated enough to help or are too stressed with other issues of keeping the household going that this aspect is neglected. It is also tempting to allow children to be up all night and sleeping all day if they are quiet, but this is impacting on their physical and mental wellbeing. The children I see look unhealthy and are constantly tired."

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"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."

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"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 lockdown due to safeguarding issues. Parents' stress levels could contribute to more children witnessing domestic violence."

Overall, the difficulties experienced by these families begin to provide a context to the issues discussed throughout this report; the difficulties children and young people in crisis have with regards to accessing basic essentials, fewer opportunities and life prospects, low self-esteem, and mental health problems of their own, in addition to having to cope with the impact of their parents' mental health problems.

Difficulties accessing the basics

To understand what it actually means to be living in poverty and crisis in the UK, we wanted to find out exactly what items families in poverty have to go without. We asked frontline workers what percentage of families they see being unable to afford basics such as food, household furniture and appliances, rent, bills, beds and clean clothes. Figure 6 shows the results; the most commonly seen issues were families being able to afford essential household items and food. Difficulty accessing food supports other research by organisations such as the Childhood Trust[3] and Child Poverty Action Group[4], who have also seen a rise in food poverty and an increase in the use of foodbanks. The proportion of families being unable to access all basics were alarmingly high.

The percentage of families receiving frontline support who are unable to access the basics are as follows:

- **57%** - household furniture, whitegoods or appliances
- **47%** - food
- **40-45%** - clothes, utilities, rent and cleaning products
- **27%** - a bed to sleep in

Figure 6. Percentage of families unable to afford the basics

Struggles affording the basics

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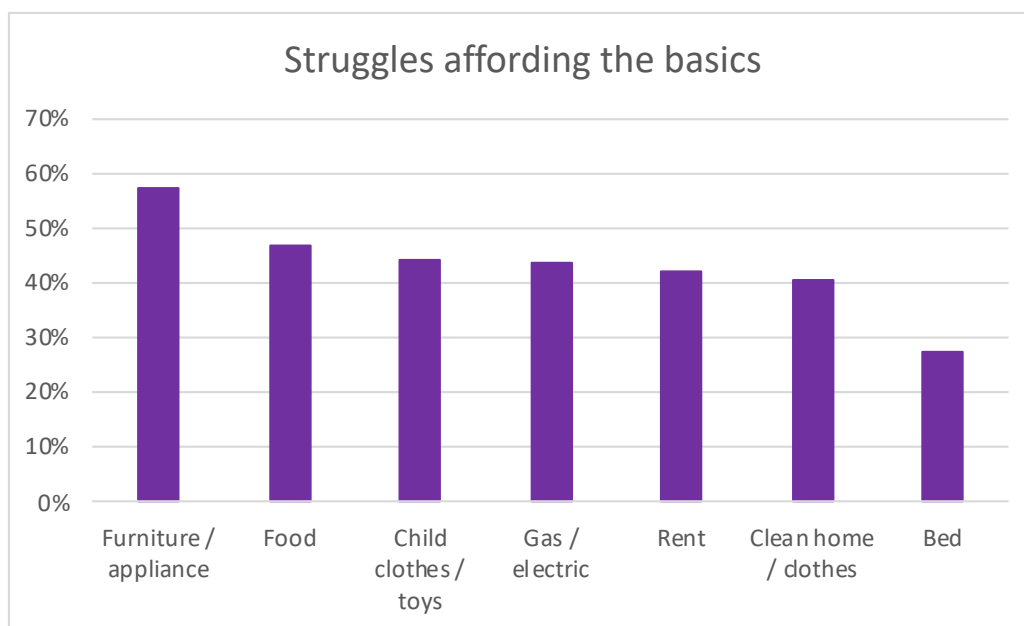
[3] The Children's Trust, Children in Lockdown: The consequences of the Coronavirus crisis for children living in poverty

[4] Child Poverty Action Group: Cost of the School Day

"Some children don't know if they will get a present for their birthday, don't want to bring friends home due to minimal essentials, [and have] no interesting tech for friends to play with. Some parents buy children phones only to pawn them when money is tight. Separated parents sometimes borrow their children's phone and don't give them back, affecting important relationships. Children have never been to theme parks or visited London or the seaside, children who don't have birthday parties and then never get invited to others' parties. Non-school uniform day is seen as a privilege, however if you have no up to date clothes, you will feel subject to being bullied and picked on and therefore children go off sick instead, which impacts their learning. Children don't mention school trips they are interested in as they know the family have no money. After the summer holidays, children say where they have been, [but] some children don't even have days out…. [Being] constantly told there is no money can limit their aspirations in life. Children who are hungry snatch food at school when given an opportunity. Parents who can't afford head lice treatment do nothing until the school complain or [the children] get teased and bullied. Some children become withdrawn due to social anxiety if they don't feel they fit in with others due to lack of modern clothes, latest schoolbag or trainers."

Not having access to basic household items such as whitegoods means that parents and carers are unable to provide basic care for their children. Even where families can just about afford food, or have access to foodbanks, these families cannot cook nutritious meals without a cooker or a fridge to store food. Moreover, lacking basic household appliances and furniture means that children have to go to school with dirty uniform and sleep in unclean bedding if parents cannot afford to replace broken washing machines. Children have nowhere to do schoolwork, eat dinner or have positive family interactions when families cannot even afford a kitchen table.

"…Women who flee domestic abuse are left with nothing. They are often placed in emergency accommodation that has no furniture at all. The children have no beds to sleep in, no table/desk to do their schoolwork. Children will sometimes go to school tired or hungry. Often the accommodation will only have a microwave, so mothers won't be able to cook [and] children are eating ready-cooked, unhealthy meals."

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"Families that I work with who are unable to replace basic household items (washing machines) are unable to send children to school in clean clothes, which has led to the young people I work with experiencing bullying and cruel comments from their peers within school. This, therefore, has a social as well as emotional impact."

"They live in constant fear of what may happen next. Will there be food and heating in their homes? Anxiety is rising and the pressure of society and peer groups is always present. These young people are struggling with everyday life."

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"It has an impact on children being able to access and experience essential skills and opportunities whilst they are growing up. In a school setting it clearly separates children who cannot afford to participate in all activities."

Over **40%** of families also struggle to afford clothes, rent, gas and electric, or the things needed to keep a clean home. As Buttle UK has reported previously, the findings highlight the bed crisis in the UK. Frontline workers report that a staggering **27%** of children receiving support do not have access to a proper bed to sleep in. This impacts children's mental health and wellbeing, their physical health and their education. When children are sharing a bed or a sofa with family members, they have disrupted sleep. Beyond the obvious difficulty sharing a physical space, children's routine can be disrupted when other family members would not go to sleep at the same time. When children are tired, they cannot focus at school or even wake up in time to go to school, impacting on their capacity to learn. A lack of sleep means children, and often all family members in the household, have low moods. These children are lacking in energy when they were already struggling with this due to a lack of nutritious meals.

"If the children/young people we work with cannot afford a bed/bedding, they are too tired through sleeping on inappropriate items to concentrate or learn. No food means no energy and illness, and no basic household items mean they have an unhealthy diet and stand out from others. No rent payments result in homelessness. All the above lead to lack of self-esteem, failure to thrive and loss – loss of home, relationships and opportunities, plus loss of health."

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"Many of the children I work with have no bed and often share with their parents. This impacts on them being able to have a good restful night's sleep, which also impacts on their learning."

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"Not having a clean bed to sleep in and bedroom furniture has a massive impact on children we work with. Also, [not] having essential household items such as [a] washing machine, cooker and fridge freezer [leads to the child] being hungry and having clothes that are not clean. [This] has a massive impact on these children when they attend school."

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"Not having a bed to sleep in means the children do not get a good night's sleep. Their emotional and physical well-being is then being hindered. I find that if children do not have clean clothes, such as school uniform, they do not have good attendance at school. They are worried about what their peers will say about their appearance."

When asked to tell us how being unable to access these basics impacts on children, the most common themes were mental health and wellbeing, schooling, food, peer relationships, self-esteem, housing and bills. It was also apparent that none of these issues occur in isolation. When families and young people are in poverty, they have to make difficult decisions every day about whether to pay rent or feed their children, to buy essential furniture and items or pay for travel to get children to school. A lack of food and basic items can affect mental health and education, mental health problems can impact education and vice-versa. Children cannot access lots of these basics at one time which work together to impact the child. Much of the negative impact on children comes from witnessing and understanding the pressure on parents who cannot provide for their children, or parents' behaviour towards their children as a product of the stress they feel from being unable provide for their children.

"All of the above [impact] young people. If they don't have a secure, safe base and have adequate food and clothing then they will not have good mental health or be able to learn."

Table 2. Percentage of qualitative responses containing themes for specific issues around accessing the basics

Theme	%	Theme	%
Mental health / wellbeing	41%	Finance	12%
School / education	35%	Housing	11%
Food	29%	Family relationships	8%
Peer relationships	25%	Activities	5%
Confidence / self-esteem	15%	Income	4%
Items / toys / clothes	14%	Digital access	4%
Support	13%		

Issues with affordable housing means that children are often moving frequently and are unable to settle into one school, which impacts on their education and prevents them from developing meaningful relationships with peers. Many of the children are living in temporary accommodation, have had to flee their homes due to domestic violence and no longer have any of their own belongings. Ill-equipped homes with a lack of household items and appliances means that children cannot have proper meals or clean clothes. Parents being unable to afford rent leads to evictions and families being moved far away from their schools, which in turn results in poor attendance. Moreover, living in homes where parents and young people cannot afford heating, hot water or electricity also has a massive impact on children and young people.

"As most of these young children have problems with regular meals, it makes it difficult for them to concentrate at school. This also causes truancy as some of these children decide to hang around the local McDonalds where they can beg for food or at other places where food is prepared for sale to the public. Not having a bed and a room is also another factor which affects their education. Most of them find it hard and difficult to study in the living room where they usually sleep with the whole family watching television. The desire of their parents to preserve the light purchased on the meter means that when mum or dad says light off, this means lights off and no studies for them."

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"Not having enough food, clothes [or] heating has a detrimental impact on a young person's ability to function at home [and] in school. Their confidence and self-esteem is low and they cannot improve their own circumstances because they are fighting the constant battle of neglect. This in turn impacts the young person when they become parents and we are left with this cycle of abuse for young people."

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"Not having the basics can impact the children and young people as they are not getting a good sleep routine [and are] sharing overcrowded homes. [Children] feel different if they do not have the correct uniform or school equipment. [They are] unable to have clean clothing and wash themselves if finances are tight or washing machines break down. Many families are living day to day and have no extra money for emergency situations."

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"The young families I work with are usually evicted if they cannot make a rent payment and they usually start their tenancy with debt as they are usually paying rent in arrears. Most won't have the money to pay it up front and if they do, they usually use the money for bills and furniture to pay for it."

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"Some residents have to make a decision to spend money on food or rent, on travel to college or food."

"[Poverty] can affect their mental health [and] it can lead to bullying when families can't wash children's clothes. It can lead to co-sleeping or some of the family sleeping on the sofa or bare floor."

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"Living in a cold dark flat is a miserable experience. Not having electricity means they are unable to cook food and have to sit in the dark unable to use technology, watch tv or listen to music or even charge their phones. This all impacts on their physical and mental health and education as they are unable to study. Not having gas can mean not having hot water or central heating. Some of our [clients] with electric showers/cookers often do not use their central heating in the winter because they cannot afford the cost of this."

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"Numerous families have lost their tenancy due to not being able to afford top-up rent. Children [who are] moving constantly lack stability, losing friendships when they change schools [and] struggle to fit in."

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"The families come into refuge with minimal belongings, when they get rehoused most families do not have any large items for their new homes, [such as] beds, a cooker, fridge, sofa, wardrobes etc. I always suggest to the mums that they tell the children they are camping in their new homes until myself or other workers can assist them through charities and donations to get these large items for their homes. 95% of families that come through refuge are in receipt of benefits and many of them have debts to pay that their abusive partners have run up in their names."

How has COVID-19 affected 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 unable to afford and access food, support, and the items needed to engage in education; parents' capacity to home-school children; and being unable to afford rent and bills. Being unable to go to school has substantially increased costs for families at home, with the government support not going far enough to make up this difference. Across the board it was noted that increased difficulties in accessing the basics as a result of COVID-19 have impacted children and parents' wellbeing, mental health and levels of stress. Many respondents also noted the increased difficulties children now face with peer relationships and digital access, which impact on their education and have further negative effects on mental health. This provides an initial overview to what will be presented later in the report with regards to how poverty impacts on children and young people's mental health and education.

"Access to children's support networks i.e. school has been removed. Parents on low incomes struggle to provide basics for kids…Now people are stuck at home, there is even less to do, causing both parents' and children's mental health to deteriorate."

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"Because of COVID-19 this has been difficult for a lot of our families as they live, sleep and eat in one room. Because there is no school, the children have little to do and their mums are not in the right place for home schooling. The other added expense is food, as they are not having school dinners."

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"Children and young people who do not have access to the basics are impacted in all areas of their wellbeing. This is even more amplified during the current lockdown. Children are not attending school and as such are not being seen for long periods of time. Additionally, not all children have access to home learning equipment and wifi. I have increasingly observed schools setting tasks to do at home using different equipment which families do not have or simply cannot afford to buy. This is isolating them further. Increasingly, families have found themselves in financial difficulty and are having to utilise foodbanks etc., to survive."

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"COVID-19 has had a huge impact on a large percentage of the families I work with and the mental health impacts are significant. Families have been forced to spend longer together and children who would normally be in school or nursery have been home. Parents [are] unable to go to work due to this and are not able to rely on their usual childcare such as grandparents or family members due to lockdown guidelines. Families have relied more on food banks for essentials. Families in low income jobs usually have a 0-hour contract and, if benefits have been applied for, there has been a delay in receiving anything."

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"As well as children not being able to access the basics, there has been added pressure for the children to be educated at home. Many families do not have adequate clothing, food, furniture etc., let alone have access to internet, laptops, or tablets… Many families have lost or had their income reduced, but have the children home 24 hours a day which has increased the cost of living. Families have needed to access support with food vouchers [and] assistance with additional fuel costs. The added risk to health for everyone has caused additional stresses in families. Domestic Abuse also needs to be considered, as children may not have a safe place due to the schools being closed, thus leaving them more vulnerable."

***

"Access to children's support networks i.e. school has been removed. Parents on low incomes struggle to provide basics for kids…Now people are stuck at home, there is even less to do, causing both parents' and children's mental health to deteriorate."

Table 3. Percentage of qualitative responses containing themes for specific issues around COVID-19 and accessing the basics.

Theme	%	Theme	%
Food	49%	Digital access	15%
Support / Isolation	41%	Peer relationships	14%
Education	32%	Shopping / Items	12%
Rent / Bills	30%	Employment / Income	12%
Finances	21%	Family relationships	9%
Mental health / wellbeing	19%	Activities / Routine	7%
Difficult / struggle	16%	Housing	3%

COVID-19 and food poverty

Almost 50% of respondents provided insight into how COVID-19 has made, what was already a catastrophic food poverty crisis, even harder for a large number of families. COVID-19 has meant that many more families simply cannot afford to buy food due to a loss of income. Many families have been impacted by having to feed their children three meals a day whilst they are not at school, whilst government support for free school meals does not stretch to meet these families' needs. Many families in poverty do not have the means to access foods, whether it be because they live too far from supermarkets and could not risk getting public transport, or because single parents were not allowed to enter supermarkets with their children and could not leave them home alone. Many families have had to resort to using local convenience stores that sell food at inflated prices. Others have had to put their health at risk by making more regular trips to supermarkets because they do not have the luxury of being able to bulk-buy food to enable fewer trips.

"Parents haven't been able to afford the luxury of paying higher prices for foods. Foodbanks have struggled and families haven't had the same quantity of food that they normally would."

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"A drop in wages or loss of jobs has seen children's access to basics affected. The children being at home all day is costing the parents more in food and utilities and they can struggle to cover these."

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"A lot of the mothers we work with have been furloughed/lost their jobs. This has impacted on their ability to be able to afford food and essentials."

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"Access to food has been a big difficulty through COVID-19. Even though there have been the Free School Meals vouchers these don't always go far enough, particularly in cases where parents who would normally work no longer can, or where the voucher scheme hasn't worked."

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"Food prices rose even more, leading to parents struggling to pay for some of the most basic needs, and shortages and restrictions on purchasing of some goods also impacted on the children and families in in general."

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"Children are at home with limited support networks. Parents do not have internet access, [or] bank card facilities to buy online... One parent was asked to leave 4 of her 5 children, all under the age of 7, outside [the supermarket] due to limits on number of persons allowed in store. [Families have] to make daily trips, on foot, in an attempt to buy essentials such as hand soap and toilet paper, or in some cases paying over the odds for these items in small local shop as they are only place to get necessary items."

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"COVID-19 has impacted children as a large amount have not been able to access school which tends to be a massive part of children's day-to-day life [for] socialising, meeting basic needs such as meals etc. This has caused parents to have a bigger stress, [having to] financially providing more meals and care than usually is needed."

***

"COVID-19 has greatly impacted the lives of children who are fleeing domestic violence. Single parent families on low incomes have seen an increase in price of the basic food and toiletries in independent shops that, for some, are the only shops in walking distance to them… So many families have become dependent on charities and food banks who have been working with us to deliver basic food to women who are unable to travel to supermarkets. Another area that has been greatly impacted is education, as many children do not have the equipment required to engage in the e-learning that schools are supplying. COVID-19 has seriously isolated these already isolated families and has made providing support to these families extremely difficult."

***

"Priorities changed overnight and being able to feed the family and cover fuel costs became the focus. Some families, for whom this had never been an issue previously, did not know how to access support, so children were having to do without. This was an additional factor over them being withdrawn from everything they knew - school, nursery, friends, clubs etc. Some families had been saving for basic household items like furniture and whitegoods, but this money had to be used for other things like food and bills. Children who had previously been eating regular healthy meals now had to rely on cheaper options and more processed foods. Some families are having a late breakfast so they can skip lunch."

COVID-19 and increases in living costs

Beyond being able to afford food, it was also noted that isolating at home has meant a substantial increase in the cost of everyday living for families. Having to feed children three meals a day means having to cook in the home more often. Home-schooling and entertaining children in the home means greater use of laptops, televisions and other electronic goods. All of these things mean that the cost of gas and electric has increased for families, many of whom could not afford the costs before the lockdown period began.

"Children and young people being at home [means] an increase in utility and food bills for many households, which is a need parents are struggling to meet. As a result, families are accessing foodbanks more often and seeking support from other agencies to meet this need. In the initial stages of lockdown when supplies were scarce in shops, many families found themselves struggling"

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"During lockdown families are eating more and utility bills are increased as more electricity is being used as they are in the house more, [which] puts extra financial pressure on families."

***

"Some have been unable to access food due to the restrictions placed upon them at the beginning of this pandemic. Because of their lack of income, they were unable to bulk buy like some families were able to. Others were unable to keep up their utility payments and often used their emergency gas or electricity on their pre- payment meters as a result of having to spend more time indoors. Some young people have had to go without food and heating for days before this has been resolved."

***

"Many families struggled with food and fuel supplies, as they needed more having the whole family at home all day rather than being out at school or work. Children were bored and hungry, isolated from support from school and their local community or clubs. This affected their sleep, their mental health and emotional wellbeing, [and] had an impact on relationships."

***

"[Families are] reluctant to put heating on/use electricity as they worry that they cannot afford to do so. Internet provision/computers have become essential in so many areas of life yet this is still isn't affordable for most. Self-esteem is low – those on Universal Credit [are] unable to afford basic, essential clothing. Many struggle to eat healthily which impacts health and emotional wellbeing."

Working in poverty, income and need for support

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 the percentage of families they work with who live in destitution and have had changes to their employment circumstances. Overall, an average of 40% of families receiving frontline support are living in destitution. Additionally, a shocking number of people are in need of financial support even when working – on average, 62% of families need financial support when someone in the home is in employment, showing that even being in employment is not enough for families to make ends meet.

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

COVID-19 and employment

Over **30%** of families have had to apply for universal credit since the start of COVID-19. A quarter of families receiving frontline support have been furloughed, and a quarter of families have either been impacted by working on 0-hour contracts or have permanently lost their job. Only **3%** of families receiving frontline support have entered employment at this time.

It is no wonder these families are struggling to make ends meet when the percentages estimated by frontline workers across the UK indicates that the employment and income of those who were already in crisis is disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 compared to the UK population. Whilst the **25%** of families being furloughed is in line with the general population under the furlough scheme[5], the reported **10%** of vulnerable families losing their jobs is over **20-fold higher** than the 0.4% general redundancy population,[6] and the proportion of people reported to be on 0-hour and casual contracts is **five times higher** than the 3% of the total population.[7]

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[5] HMRC Job Retention Scheme Statistics
[6] ONS Redundancy Statistics, July 2020
[7] ONS 0-hour contract statistics, February 2020

Figure 7. Employment and financial circumstances during COVID-19.
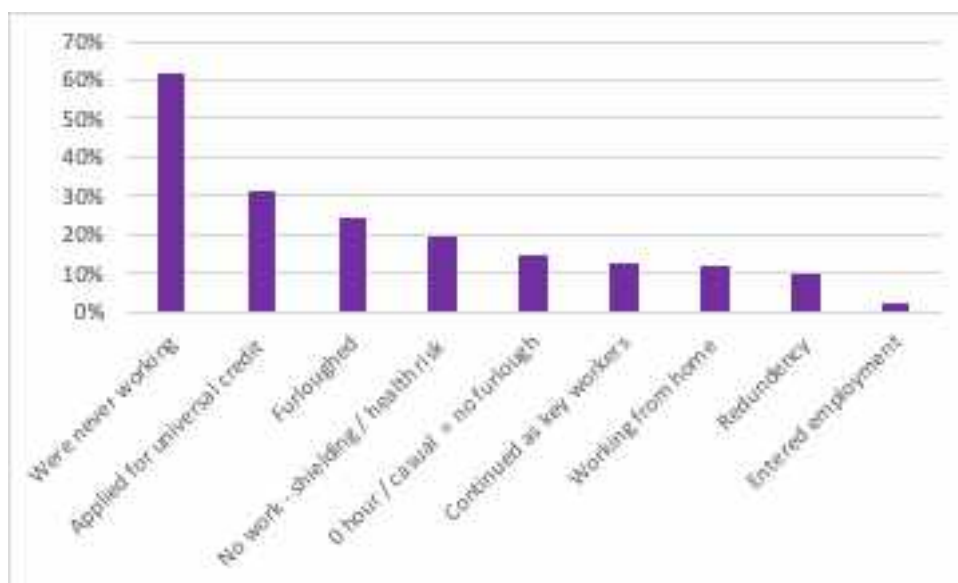
We also asked respondents to inform us how many families in general (prior to COVID-19) have needed support in the form of foodbanks, local authority welfare assistance, financial advice, obtaining household furniture, support with utility bills, finding accommodation or paying rent arrears. We also asked whether there have been changes in need and availability of this support during COVID-19.

Overall, the most common support needed was foodbanks, with an average of **47%** of families needing this support, closely followed by mental health support (**45%** of families) and financial advice (**43%** of families). Over **30%** of families receiving frontline support need the other support listed below, support buying basic household items, utility bill support, and Local Authority Welfare Assistance.

The biggest increase in need during COVID-19 has been for foodbanks and local authority welfare assistance; a worrying **83%** of frontline workers have seen an increase in need for foodbanks and **64%** for local authority welfare assistance. Moreover, over **50%** of respondents have seen an increase in the need for rent and utility bill support during the pandemic. Conversely, very few frontline workers have seen decreases in need for any of these forms of support.

The biggest decrease in need for support has been assistance finding accommodation; however, even with lockdown restrictions temporarily halting house moves, only **7%** of frontline workers have seen a decrease in need for this support.

This evidence further accentuates how families who already struggled, or who were just about making do, are now in need of more help than ever before.

Table 4. Percentage of families needing support and change in need during COVID-19

Support	% needing support	Change in need since COVID-19		
		Decrease	No change	Increase
Foodbanks	47%	1%	16%	83%
Financial advice	43%	2%	36%	62%
Local authority welfare assistance	39%	1%	35%	64%
Support obtaining household items (e.g. white goods, furniture)	35%	5%	57%	38%
Financial support for utility bills	34%	2%	41%	58%
Support finding accommodation	32%	7%	55%	38%
Financial support for rent arrears	31%	2%	48%	50%

COVID-19 and access to support

To understand the availability of support relative to changes in need during COVID-19, we asked respondents to report whether they have seen changes in the availability of support at this time. Whilst the need for all forms of support increased in at least 38% of cases, the availability of support has not increased to meet this demand. Only 20% or less of frontline workers have seen an increase in support for household items, mental health support and support finding accommodation. The only support to have increased in availability -in above 36% of cases - is foodbanks. Assistance finding accommodation and support obtaining household items are both more than twice as likely to have decreased in availability during COVID-19 than to have increased. Across all forms of support, the percentage of frontline workers seeing an increase in need is substantially greater than the percentage seeing an increase in availability, demonstrating that there is not enough being done to ensure that children and young people have access to the very basics needed to live.

Table 5. Change in availability of support during COVID-19

Support	Change in availability		
	Decrease	**No Change**	**increase**
Food banks	21%	17%	61%
Local authority welfare assistance	24%	39%	36%
Support obtaining household items (e.g. white goods, furniture)	40%	40%	19%
Financial support for utility bills	22%	48%	30%
Financial support for rent arrears	21%	56%	23%
Financial advice	29%	46%	25%
Support finding accommodation	46%	40%	14%

When we asked frontline workers how COVID-19 has affected access to the basics, difficulties in accessing support was one of the key factors, and responses have highlighted what it means for families who are unable to access the support that they would normally receive. Being out of school means that children do not have this immediate form of support on a day-to-day basis, and many frontline workers have been unable to provide their full service or see families face-to-face.

It was acknowledged that schools and other frontline services have still been working very hard to try and ensure the safety of the most vulnerable children, but that this support also depends on parents' capacity to access and engage in support during lockdown. Many services have been cut during COVID-19 due to a lack of available funding, meaning more families have been struggling. Not having access to this support reduces access to the basics, affects children and young people's education and wellbeing, and puts many children's safety at risk. Wider support networks such as extended family, friends and the community have also become difficult to access due to lockdown.

"Being out of school for a significantly long period of time has impacted upon children and young people greatly. The schools are a huge part of their support network and sight these individuals on a daily basis. They are able to contact Children's Services immediately if they have concerns or in some cases contact appropriate services themselves too. In my experience, the added stress and anxiety from COVID-19 has seen a rise in incidents of domestic violence which has stemmed from a number of factors relating to finances and ability to provide food and basic necessities."

**

"During lockdown families are eating more and utility bills are increased as more electricity is being used as they are in the house more, so [this] puts extra financial pressure on families. We have had young people thrown out of their family homes because of this added cost and stress, leaving young people in more difficulties... We have young people sofa surfing, living in hostels and also on the street. They have not had access to food, clothing, or shelter at times which has affected their health, choices and relationships. Services/projects have been closed or running in a different way… like respite for young carers, counselling, parenting programmes, youth clubs [and] support groups, and we find that this has had a huge impact on so many. Some parents are now on medication for anxiety and stress. Young people have been in hospital for overdoses. Food bank referrals have increased massively. Not having places that provide free or low-cost hot meals for local families has been difficult, as many access these weekly (sometimes daily)."

**

"Although our young people have received additional funds in their Universal Credit payments to help cover the extra costs involved, [this] hasn't really made a significant impact due to the shortfall in not getting bursaries and having to use more gas and electric whilst being at home.... especially if they couldn't afford it before. Our young people have also been left to their own devices when having to deal with the impact of being isolated during lockdown e.g. not having access to staff who were originally working from home and/ or family and friends. Which has led to a lot of our young people becoming demotivated, stressed and very uncertain about their future."

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"As a support worker I am often able to offer practical and physical help to people but, in these times, I am limited to phone contact. This can make arranging help and support enormously problematic. A more immediate impact is the estrangement of support networks: people are cut off from family and friends who, in normal circumstances, would help out with food, money, childminding etc."

***

"Being at home [and] not going to school has not only impacted on their access to learning but some children are safer in schools; they would have someone to talk to and adults to look out for them. Children and young people's support networks have been diminished from friends, family and other safe adults that care for them."

***

"Many of the families we work with were struggling to make ends meet before the COVID-19 crisis hit, so they have spiralled further into debt, having to make choices around food and heating for example. The young people we have seen are out of a school routine; they are not getting all the support they need due to services being stretched to capacity and school is such a great safe supportive place for them to be, and teachers / youth workers can't see how they are managing... This is going to take a long time to recover from the situation we are in for the most deprived communities in our society for sure."

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"[The] mental health of adults and children have been affected enormously. Many families are isolated in normal circumstances, however this isolation has grown. Families who have fled domestic violence do not have the support network and have to take all their children out with them. Although these children have been offered a school place, parents are too worried to take it. We make contact with these families on a weekly/twice weekly basis and support where needed. Families are also struggling to get their children to engage in their learning, also larger families are juggling the needs of different age groups. Children are missing social time with friends, playing games or attending clubs, usually spending more time on computers. We expect mental health concerns to grow for adults and children in our community."

***

To summarise, a shocking number of families do not have access to the basic items that many of us take for granted. Many children and young people are forced to make decisions between affording food, making rent payments or putting electricity and hot water in their homes. Many children are living in homes that lack basic furniture and appliances needed to be able to carry out essential tasks; parents and carers cannot cook meals or store fresh food for their children, families cannot sit and eat dinner together at tables and parents cannot wash children's clothes and bedding. Even when families do have all the items necessary, they cannot afford the gas and electric needed to run these appliances. Moreover, a staggering quarter of children and young people receiving frontline support do not even have a bed of their own to sleep in. These problems have only been getting worse during COVID-19. Families have been stuck in homes that cannot meet their basic needs for 24 hours a day. Being home has made the cost of living even higher for families who already could not afford to run their homes. More families have been struggling to access food, and across all support for basic items, even where the availability of support has increased during COVID-19, this has not met the increased need for support. Families who were already isolated from society before COVID-19 are now more isolated than ever.

The impact of poverty on mental health

To understand the prevalence of mental health issues for children in poverty and crisis, we asked frontline workers to report what percentage of the children they work with have mental health problems and behaviour problems. Over 50% of children receiving frontline support experience these issues.

- **51%** of children accessing frontline support have mental health problems
- **53%** of children accessing frontline support have behaviour problems

The information provided in responses throughout the survey goes a long way to provide insight into exactly how living in poverty and crisis can lead to such a high percentage of children experiencing mental health problems. One of the key issues identified throughout all topics in the survey was mental health and wellbeing. Frontline workers see every day how not having access to the basics, adverse childhood experiences and unequal access to education impact on children's mental health and wellbeing, and that all of these issues are interlinked. Living in poverty and the strain that comes with it means that children are isolated from peers, living under immense strain in the home, and often living with parents who have mental health problems themselves and are not coping. This results in poorer parent-child relationships and an increase sense of caring responsibility from the children. Respondents frequently noted that these issues can lead to children being anxious, depressed, having low self-esteem and low sense of worth.

Accessing the basics and child mental health and wellbeing

When asked which difficulty with accessing the basics has the biggest impact on children's mental health, food poverty was seen as being the most detrimental, followed by not having access to clothes and toys, rent payments and not having essential household items.

The following percentage of respondents reported that lacking these basics as having the biggest detrimental impact to children and young people in poverty:

- **42%** - Food poverty

- **17%** - Toys and clothes

- **12%** - Rent payments

- **9%** - Household items (appliances, furniture, whitegoods)

Figure 8. The basic items that have the biggest impact on mental health
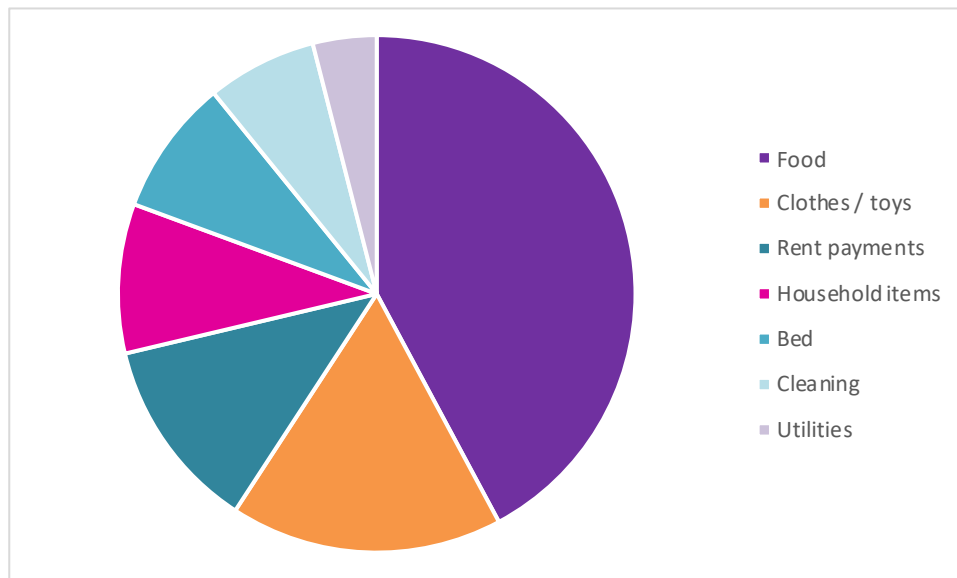
Amongst the qualitative responses to questions about how difficulties accessing the basics impact children generally, frontline workers highlighted just how much not being able to access these essential home resources can influence children's mental health and wellbeing. Frontline workers frequently see that children's self-worth is massively impacted when they are growing up believing that they are not worth these basic items. Often, younger children do not understand why they cannot have clean clothes that fit properly, or why their parents cannot buy them certain toys that they see their friends playing with. This can lead to children being both sad and angry, which can have a long-term impact on their mental health. Anxiety was a common theme throughout responses; children have anxiety around when their next hot meal will be, and also pick up on when their parents are stressed about money. They take on this burden and become anxious themselves. This role reversal often occurs when parents have mental health problems and children have to step up and become carers in the home. Taking on the caring responsibilities in the home increases pressure and can affect children's mental health, particularly stress, anxiety and feelings of isolation.

"Children I am working with have informed me they feel ashamed, going without basic need 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."

***

"Children I work with will often be very aware of financial struggles even when parents have attempted to shield them. Children will worry about their parents and their brother and sisters. Children often carry this responsibility and feel that they should somehow contribute and lessen the worries. Children's mental health is affected by being exposed to worries that children should not be subjected to. In my experience, it is usually worrying about others that affects their mental health, not worrying about their own personal needs. In fact, they will often sacrifice the little they have to give it to someone they believe needs it more (siblings/parents)."

***

"The children are young and do not understand that they can't have what mummy can't provide. This also impacts hugely on the mental health of the parent which impacts on the child. They see impatient, sad parents who then struggle to meet the children's emotional wellbeing."

***

"Children are affected by the impact on their parents. They may not understand all the implications, but they pick up on the stress and anxiety from their parents. They are also affected when they become aware that they may look dirtier, or feel embarrassed about having friends home if they don't have 'things' that their friends have or as nice looking home environments."

***

"We see children who are frightened to ask for basics as they know their parents can't afford them, so they do without. They avoid going to school or disengage with friends/peers as they don't want anyone knowing what it going on their home."

Parent mental health, family relationships and child mental health and wellbeing

When asked about how difficulties accessing the basics impacts children generally, and how poverty is linked to mental health, respondents identified parent and carer mental health problems and difficult family relationships as common issues.

Respondents reported that:

- **51%** of children receiving frontline support are experiencing difficulties in relationships with their parents

- **38%** of these children experience sibling relationship difficulties.

Parent mental health problems are one of the identified ACEs that can impact children's outcomes into adulthood, and respondents continually highlighted throughout the survey how parent mental health problems can be affected by not being able to provide the basics. Poor mental health further impacts parents' capacity to provide the basics for their children. This in turn impacts children's mental health and wellbeing both directly and indirectly. Parent mental health issues can also impact parents' capacity to provide love and care for their children, and parents' stress and poor wellbeing as a result of poverty and crisis can lead to more negative parent-child relationships, increase strain in the home and, in turn, worsen mental health issues for both children and parents. This ultimately leads to a negative cycle of stress and mental ill-health in the home. Others highlighted that living in poverty prevents families from having experiences that can help families bond and improve relationships. Cramped living conditions, hunger and tiredness can all contribute to more negative family relationships.

"If parents are worried about finances, then they may not respond in a positive and nurturing way to their children, which impacts on a child's ability to feel safe and thus impacts their behaviour, and ability to relate to others positively."

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"Parents feel distressed and guilty when they are unable to provide basic care for their children, such as paying rent or buying enough food for their children. Children feel anxious and stressed when their parents are sad, arguing and when they compare with what their friends have."

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"Children feel different from their peers and this can impact their social development. Parents can feel like they are failing and trying to meet all of their children's needs can be stressful. This stress then impacts further on the children."

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"[Children are] going hungry, not having clean/right-sized clothes so [are] being bullied. [Children are] tired as they can be hungry… parents [are] more stressed so they snap more easily and [children] are less played with/shown affection, have less toys and less activities so are less stimulated [and therefore] develop less well."

***

"Some children can be resentful towards their care givers when they don't have enough - again other problems can stem from poverty which children are witness to and impacted by such as substance misuse, parental poor mental health and domestic abuse."

***

"Families are constantly under pressure due to lack of money and worrying about paying for food and essentials. This stress adds to mental health issues. children often do not feel that they have a secure family life and this impacts on their behaviour and mental wellbeing. It also affects relationships with siblings and peers."

***

"Families don't have extra financial resources to provide extra equipment for children to connect with friends. Tensions rise within the household and children are becoming bored and frustrated."

***

"[Children and young people in poverty have] limited access to fun activities and holidays which contributes to making shared memories and bonds, and [parents have] difficulty in being able to provide each child with what they need and foster opportunities to connect with siblings and friends."

***

"Our young people are financially independent and on benefits while most of their peers are living at home and supported by their parents. With rent etc to pay, our young people can be worse of if they work and will sometimes have to choose between getting to college or having a social life. Lack of funds can isolate our young people, limit their aspirations and make it very difficult to find their way out of the poverty cycle."

***

"Parents who are overwhelmed with constantly worrying about money or how they are perceived by others are less able to respond to changing needs of their children. This can lead to increases in tensions between children and parents and parents struggling to effectively support children and young people to make positive choices for themselves in peer relations."

***

"Poverty impacts every area of a child's life; self-esteem, health, ability to make friendships, being able to access activities in their local area or go on trips. Poverty affects the families' mental health issues; it brings on anxiety about bills and being able to pay rent and buy food, worries about eviction, being unable to afford to buy the basics for the children such as clothes, books, toys, and food. Relationships between children and parents is affected due to parents trying to hide debts and bills from the children or on the other hand trying to keep up with neighbours and friends and getting in to debt, using unscrupulous loan sharks and getting in to serious trouble trying to pay the loan back."

***

"Some are living in homeless accommodation; some are in cramped housing. Relationships between children, parents and siblings are tense due to these conditions and they are all in the home together. Many have no outside space such as gardens. There isn't much green space in the local area. Young people and children are struggling with their feelings and emotions as they are unable to see friends, be engaged in learning, leisure activities or socialise. They have little data or no internet or no phones/computers to connect with people. They cannot afford this. They have little money for basics such as food [which] causes extra stress. They are low- or no-income families... Mental health issues, drug and alcohol misuse have increased. They don't have access to many services in the local area. Local shops are higher priced."

Accessing the basics, peer relationships and child mental health and wellbeing

One of the main anxieties around not having access to the basics was how children fit in with their peers. Frontline workers reported that 45% of the children they work with have difficulties in peer relationships. Not having the basic items outlined above means that children are excluded from activities and social interactions with peers that would otherwise be the norm. Not having furniture, basic appliances, a bedroom or toys in the home means that children are often too embarrassed to bring children home for playdates out of school time. In some cases, even when children want to do so, parents are too embarrassed. When parents cannot afford to feed their own children, it is not possible to have an extra mouth to feed. When children cannot invite others into their home, it means that these children are not included in playdates at others' homes.

Children can be teased or bullied by their peers for poor hygiene or not having the latest clothes and toys. Where families cannot afford digital equipment or internet access, children are also excluded from online social interactions, further distancing themselves from their peers. These feelings of social exclusion, feeling like they do not fit in, or feeling actively disliked and penalised by peers for not having the basic things that many children take for granted, again, has a massive impact on children's sense of self-worth. It can make them too anxious to try and engage with peers and lead to children withdrawing further and becoming more isolated. It can lead to children feeling angry and depressed about not being allowed to have the same things as their friends. Feeling rejected by peers can lead to low self-esteem, low mood and depression.

"It impacts on their emotional and mental health. Children are very aware of their appearance and other children will not hesitate to point out if a child smells or has holes in their clothes. Children cannot comprehend a full day at school when they are hungry, but they are also told by their family not to ask for food/help."

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"Most the families we work with are below the poverty line and are in receipt of benefits, [and] live in homes that are not suitable. Children that we work with have mental health [issues], anxiety, [and] behavioural issues that are mainly due to parents being in distress... Many are bullied as they do not have the named clothes, Xboxes etc., due to their parent also having a mental health or physical health problem and being reliant on benefits."

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"Children are poorly presented and this impacts on their self-esteem and relationships with peers, often resulting in bullying or poor school attendance which impacts on their educational attainment or their involvement in Anti-social behaviour. It also increases their risk to criminal exploitation and grooming."

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"A lot of the younger children from about 5 [years of age] onwards realise they don't have the same things as other children and become withdrawn or sad when parents cannot provide these. They don't have the party frock or toys and don't know why. A lot of teenage children become depressed. They don't go out as they don't look right. They don't have a basic phone or can't top up. they isolate themselves a lot. They are also aware of the impact of poverty, they don't have basic food and have food parcels, the don't have heating on, they can't have the TV. Children often don't have great sleeping arrangements, have to share and don't get a good night's sleep. They are tired, not [getting] the right nutrition to have energy, not having the right clothes, and they do not want to go to school."

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"Families… are unable to replace basic household items (washing machines) and are unable to send children to school in clean clothes, which has led to the young people I work with experiencing bullying and cruel comments from their peers within school. This therefore has a social as well as emotional impact."

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"Children and young people have an underlying sense of not been valued by society and their better-off peers. They are focused on achieving the basics to survive."

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"Children are unable to do as much as their peers, and families who are struggling with the basics cannot afford to spend money on extracurricular activities that would help reduce some of the issues listed above."

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"Children in low income families do not have the same opportunities to take part in activities in the community, this leads to less opportunities for making new friends and creating stronger friendships within their current circle and may feel left out of circles who attend activities together."

***

"Poverty greatly impacts children's mental health as it impacts on their confidence and self-esteem. Relationships between parents and children are more strained parents are unable to prove basic never mind what other children are getting. Children growing up in poverty are less likely to have the skills and confidence to build relations. They are also viewed as different and less valued and accepted by their peers."

"Poverty greatly impacts children's mental health as it impacts on their confidence and self-esteem. Relationships between parents and children are more strained. Parents are unable to provide basics, never mind what other children are getting. Children growing up in poverty are less likely to have the skills and confidence to build relationships. They are also viewed as different and less valued and accepted by their peers."

Table 6. Percentage of qualitative responses containing themes for how poverty impacts children and young people's mental health

Theme	%	Theme	%
Peers / friends	21%	Stress / worry	12%
Parent	18%	Activities	12%
Isolation / support	17%	Housing	7%
Access	13%	Essential items	6%
Relationships	12%	Self-esteem / confidence	6%
Food	12%		

The impact of COVID-19 on child mental health and relationships

We asked respondents whether they have seen any changes in children and young people's mental health problems and family relationships during COVID-19. Table 4 shows all responses.

- **84%** have seen increases in children and young people's mental health problems.

- **75%** have seen an increase in behaviour problems.

- **74%** have seen increases in difficulties in parent-child relationships.

- Over **50%** of frontline workers have seen increases in sibling and peer relationship difficulties.

- **10%** of frontline workers have seen reductions in difficulties with children and young people's relationship with peers.

When asked how mental health and family relationships have been impacted by COVID-19, the most common responses referred to children and young people 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. As also highlighted in earlier sections, the stress parents feel when having no respite from their children and the added financial impact of COVID-19 can also increase tensions. However, some frontline workers did note that families have seen it as a positive thing, as they have been able to spend time together and build relationships after trauma, and that children have felt less pressure from peers when not having to attend school. Some reported that they do not know how these things have changed because they have been unable to interact with the families they were supporting prior to COVID-19.

Table 7. Changes in mental health and relationship issues during COVID-19.

Outcome	Don't know	Decrease	No change	Increase
Child / young person mental health problems	5%	2%	8%	84%
Child / young person behaviour problems	6%	8%	12%	75%
Parent-child relationships	7%	7%	12%	74%
Sibling relationships	13%	5%	24%	58%
Peer relationships	16%	10%	19%	55%

"A number of families are reporting positive changes to their relationships with their children as they are having to spend more time together and this has been used to make positive change in interactions. For some families, this has increased the difficulties in the home, particularly between siblings. Relationship issues with friends have decreased significantly as young people are not spending time with friends and online bullying/trolling appears to have decreased."

***

"Online and telephone contact [is] offered but this is not the same as face to face with young people and children. Lockdown has impacted on [the] level of support that can be offered."

***

"Although there has been a major impact on children regarding being in lockdown and not having the proper items to be able to help them with schooling, I have seen a positive change in parenting and supporting their children, having the time to do things with them."

***

"It's about parents being 'available' for their children and they haven't got capacity if they are worried about where the next loaf of bread is coming from."

***

"Being around the same people 24/7 if there are stressors is very problematic and means older children will leave the house to avoid them and put themselves at risk of COVID-19. Everyone is more stressed and anxious in general. Families who rely on criminal activity for income have to change tactics and more young people and children are getting criminally exploited by their own parents or older siblings."

***

"Being unable to leave the home and play with their friends has had a huge effect on children's mental health - they are too young to understand why they can't. The parents not having any down time away from their children has led to tensions in many families. Domestic violence has been one of the areas that have increased."

***

"Children are locked away out of sight of support services. School once was their safe place; lockdown has prevented children from accessing education, food, friendships, support, and help. Tensions in households have risen, putting children at risk of further harm."

***

"Children are not always receiving the same stimulation at home as they would at school which is impacting their behaviour at home. Parents are not receiving any respite from school which is impacting on their mental wellbeing due to the care they are providing to their unwell children at home around the clock, especially with other children in the household... Children do not have the equipment/internet to stay in touch with friends which is affecting their social interactions and can leave them feeling isolated."

***

"COVID-19 has meant keyworkers like myself are working from home and not allowed to do home visits, meaning that some of the support the young people have to help with poverty and how they feel has gone. If they don't have internet, they cannot access any online support and they can't just ring us if they don't have credit on their phone. All my families say they are missing just talking to me face to face."

***

"Families have been stuck indoors with each other, often have no outside space and no money for extras to help the situation... Parents have been furloughed, creating more financial problems."

***

"It has trapped people in their homes often in very poor accommodation with quite depressing interiors, some children in high rise flats with no gardens. For women and children in refuges with no way to see friends or family, tensions in relationships have intensified and arguments have increased. Full time carers, especially single parents, have been physically and emotionally exhausted."

***

"Parents are at home which has proved challenging, but a lot have formed stronger attachments as they have had to be more present for their children. Some cases have proved to be very unsafe and children have been over exposed to parents' addictive habits and abuse as a result."

Table 8. Percentage of qualitative responses containing themes for how COVID-19 has impacted mental health and relationships

Theme	%	Theme	%
Increase	29%	Peers	13%
Support	21%	Pressure / stress	10%
Home	18%	Finances	10%
Parent	16%	Mental health	9%
Isolate	15%	Relationships	8%
School	14%	Anxiety / depression	7%

The impact of poverty on education

It is not a novel concept that children in poverty and crisis do not have an equal access to education. On average, respondents reported that 56% of children receiving frontline support have poor school attendance and difficulty engaging in education. Throughout the survey, there were several ways in which respondents highlighted how living in poverty impacts on children's experiences of education. Being without access to basics such as food and basic furniture means that children are too tired and hungry to focus on schoolwork. Difficulties in the home with regards to ACEs such as mental health problems, and the stress children pick up from parents, provides an additional barrier to children focusing in school, and in a lot of instances prevents children from attending school at all.

The aforementioned difficulties in peer relationships are seen as a key component of the overall school and educational experiences for these children and young people. The digital divide was a key barrier to their education– no access to electronic equipment and internet means many children are unable to learn, particularly during lockdown. We also wanted to provide a more detailed picture of how COVID-19 has impacted on children's education. Respondents outlined the true impact of the digital divide in these circumstances, as well as how the stress of providing the basics and chaotic home environments make it difficult for children to learn from home. In some cases, parent mental health problems and their own educational capacity prevents children from being home schooled at all.

Accessing the basics and education

We asked frontline workers which of the basics that children and young people frequently have to live without has the biggest impact on their education. Again, food poverty was seen as having the biggest impact.

The following percentage of respondents see a lack of access to the basics impacting education:

- **33%** - food

- **18%** - clothes or toys

- **14%** - cleaning items

- **11%** - household furniture and appliances

- **8%** - a bed to sleep in

There were several ways that not having access to the basics were noted as impacting children's education. These basic essentials are important for general health and development; lacking food, nourishment and a healthy environment with good sleep can impact children's concentration and achievement in school. It was noted that not having a warm house impacts on children's education, right down to not feeling comfortable changing into school uniform in the mornings. Being hungry also impacts on children and young people's mood and result in poorer wellbeing. Poor nutrition and living environments make children more prone to illness, which then has a knock-on effect on schooling. For younger children, not having toys and items to play with means that they fall behind at the early stages of educational development. Many respondents also highlighted how education and mental health are interlinked, and that often limited access to the basics impacts both of these simultaneously.

Figure 9. Difficulty accessing basics that has the biggest impact on education
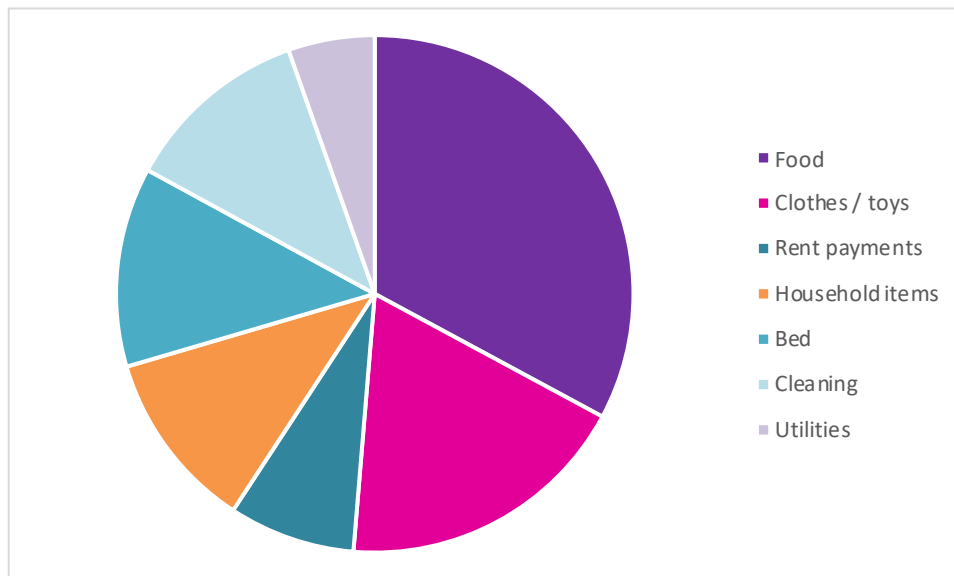
"A lot of the young people we work with find it difficult to not have the same as their peers, they find it embarrassing, it means they cannot concentrate on schoolwork, and adds to their stress and mental wellbeing."

***

"Children and young people need their homes to be a safe place to live in. They need food, warmth, toys and love in order to learn and grow and in order for their physical and emotional health needs to be addressed. When children are living in poverty this impacts their development, their mental and physical health."

***

"Children are hungry or live on a poor diet as parents cannot afford to purchase good quality foods. Malnourishment means children are not able to concentrate, sleep or focus so fall behind in school. This affects their self-esteem as they see themselves as less clever than some of their peers and this affects their self-esteem, sense of self-worth and often leads to adverse behaviours completing a cycle where they feel labelled as naughty."

***

"Children do not have access to healthy nutritious food and therefore are often tired or not well. A lot of the children are obese and this affects their health and in turn their education. Children who are not eating well are often tired, suffering from tummy problems and generally cannot focus well on their learning."

The extra school basics and education

Beyond the core basics, we also wanted to understand how many children are lacking the additional essentials that so many take for granted that are crucial for a positive educational development, and which of these barriers have the biggest impact on children's education. To understand factors impacting attendance and engagement, frontline workers were asked what percentage of families and young people have the following barriers: inability to afford school / college uniform; travel costs and distances to school; a lack of digital equipment / internet access, and lack of access to free school meals. Due to the strong link between mental health and education, we also asked what percentage of families receiving frontline support have difficulties accessing education due to parent and child mental health barriers.

The following percentage of families receiving frontline support experience these issues:

- **58%** - parent mental or physical health problems

- **57%** - no access to afterschool or extracurricular activities

- **47%** - no internet access or digital equipment

- **46%** - child mental or physical health problems

- **35%** - being without appropriate school uniform

- **32%** - unable to afford travel costs to school / college

- **29%** - no access to free school meals

- **22%** - long travel distances to school

We asked which of these factors frontline workers see having the biggest impact on the education of children and young people. Overall, a worryingly high percentage of children experience difficulties accessing education in a range of ways. The most common issues are: parent physical and mental health problems making parents unable to take children to school; children being unable to access afterschool activities; having no internet access or digital equipment to complete work at home, and children's own mental or physical health preventing them from engaging in education.

Moreover, parent mental health problems and not having digital access the issues that frontline workers see having the biggest impact on children and young people's education. Figure 8 shows that **41%** of respondents see **parent mental health** problems being the biggest barrier to children's education, and **28%** see the **digital divide** impacting children's education beyond any other barrier.

Figure 10. Ratings for the biggest barrier to education
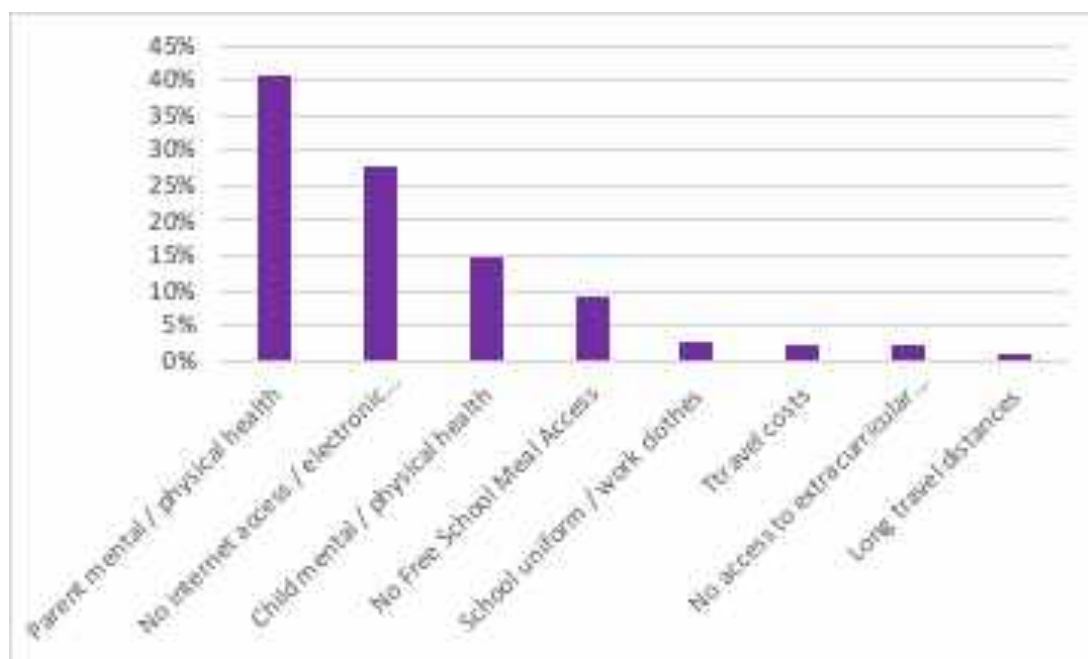
When asking frontline workers how poverty impacts on education, the most common themes to arise were mental health and wellbeing, peer relationships, difficulties from parents' perspective, and accessing / engaging with support. Mental health was the most common theme, referenced in 50% of responses. Notably, 38% highlighted that difficulties with peer relationships as a result of poverty can impact education, and 27% spoke about parents' role in children's education. Throughout responses, there was a mix of general difficulties and indications that these issues have been exacerbated during COVID-19.

As has been apparent throughout the report thus far, all of these factors are interrelated. Not being able to provide the basics and traumatic experiences can result in parent mental health problems. Parent mental health problems can impact on children's mental health and prevent children from attending school or being able to focus. Not having the basics impacts on the stimulation children have in their home and the equipment needed to learn, in addition to impacting peer relationships. Children lack confidence, become withdrawn and can be bullied for not having the same things as peers, which in turn makes them anxious about going to school. Having periods absent from education due to traumatic experiences and moving frequently can mean that children are reluctant to start attending school again. And in turn, not attending school, becoming further behind and lacking positive social relationships, can all impact the mental health of children and young people.

"A lot of these issues tie in together - if a parent has a mental health issue or is unable to afford bus fare then the long distance to travel is exponentially harder. If, on top of this, the family are unable to afford breakfast then the child needs to get in even earlier to school to go to the breakfast club. In lockdown, if internet access is difficult then they cannot engage in the online work set. If the family are in financial hardship then uniform may not be a priority, but that makes the child stand out in school and affects their mental health. If the family can't afford a washing machine, the uniform regularly has stains on it, then that has an impact too. For my families, travelling to school is often an issue that affects attendance and ability to make friends. If you're not in school, you're not socialising with your peers!."

***

"Children with mental health issues, such as low mood and high anxiety struggle to learn, are often seen as having bad parenting or being naughty children. Many children are excluded from school for challenging behaviour due to their condition or their mental health and emotional wellbeing.   Children cannot focus on education if they are subjected to abuse or neglect at home, are worried about a sibling or a parent, and are too anxious to join in with activities. Mental health impacts on their peer relationships (being bullied, name calling), and also on their learning as processing cannot take place when a child is in fight or flight mode. Building trust is impaired when a child has a mental health problem that is not being resolved or supported."

***

"[Poverty] will impact on [children and young people's] own ability to form positive relationships. It affects their educational and social development because they lack self-belief and resilience. It also leads to them losing faith in society and this can mean that they drop out of society or become involved with criminal elements. It leaves them open to all kinds of abuse because they feel so undervalued."

Table 9. Percentage of qualitative responses containing themes for how poverty impacts children's education

Theme	%	Theme	%
Mental health / wellbeing	50%	Behaviour	8%
Peers / friendships / socialising	38%	Digital access	8%
Parent	27%	Attendance	8%
Support	24%	Concentration / energy	7%
Relationship	18%	Food	7%
Confidence / self-esteem	12%		

Mental health and education in poverty

Frontline workers highlighted the impact of both parent and child mental health problems on children's education. Lots of respondents referred specifically to children's anxieties preventing them from attending school. These anxieties are often around appearance, hygiene and having the same things as their peers. Anxiety that is a result of adverse experiences can also impact on children's confidence to attend school. Parent mental health problems mean that parents don't have the capacity to take their children to school every day, help with their education or provide the basic things that children need to be able to engage in education. Sometimes, children become the carers of parents with mental and physical health problems, and this role prevents them from being able to attend school. Children are unable to focus on their work at school due to worries they have about their home situation.

"All the young people I work with suffer from PTSD due to why they had to flee their home and their treatment on their journey to the UK. As one young person told his college tutor "I was up all night having nightmares about seeing my father killed, and you are cross that I did not get to college on time". Added to this there is the uncertainty of not knowing if they will be granted leave to remain by the home office, which can leave young people with an uncertain future for years."

***

"Attainment gaps are often clear to see in the children and young people we work with. This is often due to the amount of school missed and parents struggling to encourage engagement with education. Parents' own experiences of school can play a factor and many struggle to set attendance as a boundary within the home, meaning as children mature, they too don't prioritise their education and disengage. This lack of motivation and routine can impact on the mental health of children/ young people and result in low self-esteem and self-worth, which can be difficult to address when parental mental health is also impacted."

***

"Children whose parents are struggling with mental health become carers for their parent. They are more worried about them. They miss large amounts of school because their parents don't have the motivation to get them there and if they do, the children are more worried about what's going on at home."

***

"For children with poor school attendance there are a number of issues, such as isolation and often being at home with parents who have poor mental health. This can also push children down the young carer route, isolating them further. Their own mental health can be impacted and their peer relationships suffer, leading to poor social skills."

***

"Children are living with parents who are often in distress as a result of their own mental health, relationships, social isolation and poverty. Children become acutely aware of family difficulties. This can make it hard for them to relax and enjoy learning or play. Older children can take on caring roles for other children/siblings."

***

"Most of the young people seemed to be stuck in the poverty trap and have a cycle of poor outcomes be it mental, physical health or aspects of just being stuck in poverty. Some have given up on any positive attainment and see life on benefits as [the] only option for them. As workers trying to promote education and training, [it] is difficult as [we] work with homeless youths who are penalised for trying to stay in further education, where [the] system forces a choice of benefits versus further education."

***

"Poor parental mental health impacts on the ability to consistently parent children with routines and boundaries. Children are often worried about leaving their parents at home whilst they school for fear of something happening. Attachments and separation anxiety are areas of concern."

***

"The impact of a parent's poor mental health has huge impact on their children. Daily we see children with increased levels of anxiety. This could be because they are worried about a parent, they are mirroring a parent's anxiety, they are socially isolated because the parent doesn't like taking them out or having friends round, they are fearful of "outsiders". The children's confidence is low because they are worried about upsetting a parent with low mood, their aspirations are low because their parent isn't well enough to encourage or inspire their child to 'dream big'."

For the 27% responses that referred to parents' role in education, the main issues highlighted were parent mental health problems (mirroring what has already been discussed), and parents' levels of stress reducing their capacity to support their children's education. These factors impact children's education both directly and indirectly via impacts on children's mental health, in turn impacting education. There were also reports of parents being unable to provide the adequate support and equipment needed for their children's education and wellbeing, which further exacerbates parents' mental health problems.

"The issue of parental mental health and wellbeing is intrinsically linked to their socio-economic situation and their sense of self-esteem. Parents feel that they are failing to provide for their children, they become stressed and fail to meet the expectation of others and of themselves. Children are not exposed to the best person that their parent could be and this has a detrimental impact on how they view themselves and their place in the world."

Peer relationships and education in poverty

One of the big issues around poverty and education was the social aspect that school has for children. Mirroring what was said when asked about the impact of not having the basics, many respondents noted that children and young people who are living in poverty find it difficult to fit in with their peers and are often stigmatized for not having what their friends have. This can reduce their motivation to go to school, impact their enjoyment of school and can prevent the development of positive social relationships, which is an important aspect for education and development.

Children who have had time off school due to trauma also find it difficult to settle back in and build relationships with peers. It was commonly reported that missing school has the knock-on effect of preventing social interactions and the development of friendships, which can have a longer-term impact for children's wellbeing and increase feelings of isolation. Children who are experiencing difficulties at home also struggle to talk to their peers about these issues, which can lead to them withdrawing instead.

"Children don't want to go to school, they don't socialise. They feel stigmatised for being poor. they don't have the latest uniform, or a change of uniform…They do not join in and School isn't fun at all for them. They don't form good relationships as they are always stopping and starting. They have more illness time off school for minor issues, I often hear 'I woke up with a headache'."

***

"Children miss out on meals, [or have] very limited diets – cheap processed foodstuffs as they are more affordable than fresh food and vegetables. They have no/few peer relationships or are bullied at school for their poor presentation, ill-fitting clothing, lack of materials such as pencils and rubbers. [This] results in poor self-esteem and reluctance to go to school. Children/young people [are] feigning illness/ refusing to attend due to being bullied/targeted by their peers. One child stole hair clasps as she wanted her hair to look pretty."

***

"Children's presentation can be poor; they may become untidy or look dirty and unkempt. This can lead to bullying and isolation."

***

"Lots of the children either become socially isolated from peers or become involved in risky behaviours themselves seeking out that affection / love/ warmth they do not get a home. Lots turn to substances and struggle with their own mental health and find it difficult to sustain any appropriate relationships themselves."

***

"Many of these children are unknown young carers so they are either unable to attend education on a regular basis due to caring responsibilities or parents are not in the right headspace to ensure children attend school. These children often become ostracised by their peers."

***

"Poor parental mental health affects children's own mental health and can impact relationships with peers as it can limit friendships and make children feel that they cannot discuss their parents mental health with their friends. It stops children inviting friends to their home for fear of their friends not understand their parents difficulties."

***

"Poor school attendance has a significant knock-on effect. Children who do not attend school on a regular basis have difficulties in maintaining friendship groups; they become socially isolated and start to believe that there is something wrong with them once friends shun and ignore them. Poor mental health often develops which then can lead to unwanted negative behaviours, which often leads to the child being labelled as a 'Naughty Child' which is not the case. There is not enough pastoral support or nurturing environments available in schools."

***

"Once children realise their home life isn't the 'norm', they become reluctant to have their friends visit. Some stop visiting friends as they feel they might be expected to return the invitation to their home. If their parents are drinkers/drug users it can be embarrassing having people round to the house. Children worry about their parents, I have one who refuses to go to school as it means leaving their mum on her own all day. Once mum is on her own, she starts drinking and then doesn't stop until the drink/money runs out."

COVID-19 and access to education in poverty

To understand how COVID-19 has worsened what was already an unequal access to education, we also asked directly what has been the biggest difficulty for families home schooling. The two biggest challenges reported were digital access to education and parent mental health problems, with 50% of frontline workers reporting these as the biggest challenge. Over a quarter of respondents reported that the biggest barrier to home schooling is parents struggling either due to their own educational and language barriers, or due to having to try and teach multiple children of multiple ages with different educational needs and at different stages in the curriculum.

The biggest reported challenges to home schooling are as follows:

- **26%** - digital access

- **24%** - parent mental or physical health problems being the biggest barrier to home schooling

- **12%** - parent literacy, education and English language difficulties

- **14%** - multiple children across age groups with different educational needs

When asking frontline workers how poverty has posed challenges for home schooling, the biggest themes to arise were difficulties relating to parents, internet access and general isolation. Moreover, 15% of respondents noted (unprompted) specifically that children have not been home schooled during the lockdown period, and 73% used the words "hard", "difficult", "struggle" or "challenge/ing" when describing what it is like for parents trying to home school their children. Respondents highlighted that it has been difficult for families to get support from organisations or access their local support network to assist with education. Several respondents also pointed out the further increased difficulty when families are in poverty and children have additional educational needs that require 1-to-1 support that cannot be met at home.

"All of the above have contributed to home schooling difficulties; lack of access to laptops/pc's/printers has been a big issue, parental mental health, 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 due to lockdown, furlough, etc."

***

"[Home schooling is] almost impossible for the families I work with. They have issues functioning safely in normal times, so to expect these parents and children to learn at home is impossible. [Families have] no equipment, no space, lots of people in the house, lack of internet. Parents' own education means they are unable to help their children."

***

"Children with mental health/behavioural issues have lacked the professional support that they require to learn effectively. With no formal, structured school day they have not been willing to participate in home schooling. There are often a range of age groups in one household and one carer, who often worry that they are not up to date with current learning/technology. There is sometimes no quiet space for young people to focus on schoolwork, especially when they are at home with younger siblings."

***

"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."

***

"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. [There is] very little contact from school staff to support the children and their learning at home, [with] provision online of lessons but no follow up."

***

"Children with 1-1 support due to behavioural/learning difficulties need specialist teaching and patience. Some parents do not have the right skills and this affects the parents' mental health. Parents with their own learning difficulties/poor technical skills aren't able to help their children. Some children are not learning anything. Some parents have given up trying to encourage their children to complete work to protect their own emotional wellbeing."

Table 10. Percentage of qualitative responses containing themes for what it has been like home schooling in poverty.

Theme	%	Theme	%
Parents	49%	No homeschooling	15%
Digital access	24%	Mental health / wellbeing	15%
Support	23%	Relationships	13%
Difficult	21%	Stress	9%
Struggle	21%	Equipment	9%
Education	19%	Rent / housing / household items	7%

"Children have been unable to keep in contact with friends without internet/use of mobile phone or device which is important for their peer relationships… Some parents are struggling to educate their children and offer support with homework or class routine, especially with other young children in the home or learning difficulties/mental health difficulties. A child's home environment is not always suitable for learning virtually, as a lot of children in poverty with inadequate housing can share with their siblings."

***

"The children I work with always have some degree of social and emotional difficulties and I feel this is catastrophic for them. Their development is now stunted as they have not had access to peers. Some children will have had two and a half terms out of school by September when there is a plan to return. The impact of loneliness and being cut off from peers is going to need a lot of focused intervention to help them continue to develop those skills. A pandemic is traumatic and children are going to suffer repercussions - some won't adapt to the new normal we are going to face- children with attachment difficulties had their entire routine and support network ripped away to keep them physically safe, but how to we expect them to recover from this?"

***

"Since lockdown, the parents with mental health difficulties have lacked motivation and routine which has impacted on the health and wellbeing of the children. The children have not been inspired to do school work; bedtime and mealtime routines have been disrupted; sleep deprivation has made the children irritable and anxious too. Parents are not modelling the behaviour they would like to see from their children; unrealistic expectations towards the children are making them resentful and behave unreasonably too. There has been an increase in safeguard concerns and referrals."

Poverty, home-schooling and the digital divide

The biggest issue identified around home schooling is children's access to digital equipment. Respondents highlighted that children are often sharing laptops and tablets with siblings, lack any equipment at all, have no internet access, and are trying to do work through parents' phones. This makes home schooling very difficult, if not impossible. It was also highlighted that a lack of electronic equipment not only prevents children completing schoolwork, but has also been a huge barrier to peer relationships – children cannot socialize online with their peers and have been cut off from the outside world even more so than other children. These issues, on top of all the other difficulties already discussed, means that children will be even further behind their peers when returning to school.

"Many of the children who use our service have not had access to a tablet or laptop during COVID-19 and the lockdown, it has therefore been difficult for them to interact with their distance learning at school."

***

Currently during the pandemic there a large number of children who are digitally deprived. They are attempting to access school work on a parents mobile phone which is impossible. Not having access to a laptop or internet in the home means a large number of children are socially isolated from peers at this time."

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"During this COVID-19 period, most of these children were supposed to be doing 'Home Work' online. This has not been possible; [the] majority of them do not have the electronic equipment to access the instructions and courses from the schools, and also their families cannot afford to pay for the internet and other related services. Libraries are also closed so there was no way out. We used to organise afternoon classes where we supplied laptops for usage but due to the lockdown and social distancing issues, this service has closed down since March 2020."

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"All work set by schools is electronic. Many don't have access to internet or PCs. It has taken months to get a PC and access work for some."

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"A lot of the families do not have laptops and internet in the home, just on their mobiles. If a child has been in supported school, they have lost their routine which has been the most important issue as once a routine has gone it is hard to get that back in place."

Poverty, home-schooling and parent mental health and educational barriers

The respondents reporting the difficulties parents are experiencing with home schooling mirror the comments on general difficulties in education. Parent mental health problems make it difficult to support children's education within the home. Additionally, many parents in poverty have limited education themselves, making it harder to help educate their children. Many respondents reported that parents have struggled to create routines for their children, and things have been particularly difficult where parents are trying to manage several children and support different educational needs depending on the ages of children in the home. Language barriers can also make it difficult for parents trying to navigate the UK curriculum and support their children's learning. Parents have also been affected by not having the respite they would normally have when children are at school, which can impact on parents' mental health and in turn the home learning environment. Many parents struggle when their children refuse to cooperate. Additionally, it was noted that young people who are estranged do not have parents or family to support and motivate them to continue educating themselves during lockdown.

"A lot of parents have a lot of children at different age groups; understanding the education system and what the children should be learning [is difficult]. There is also [a] language barrier as some parents can't read or write English. Some families don't see education as important as other things. Routine goes out the window so they allow the children to…stay up all night watching films, meaning they are sleeping all day."

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A lot of the time it just has not been happening. Basic routine has not been followed and the parents' mental health has suffered due to not having the usual break when the children are at school."

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"All my young people live on their own with no parents or adults so there is no one to encourage them to study or to assist with problems.   College… has moved to online work, but some have had technical issues."

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"[It is] very stressful time for both parents and children, with some parents unable to home school the children due to mental health issues and some children refusing to cooperate with parents."

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"Children are doing lower amounts of educational work as there are often barriers which include different aged children in the family home or the parent's/child's understanding of the importance of learning, so this is often not supported… The normal routine of getting up early and dressed ready for education/work is not a regular pattern, especially as many parents may be furloughed or not working themselves."

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"Parents who have poor levels of education themselves struggle with the delivery of schoolwork due to its complexity. Parents with poor mental health have struggled to maintain routine and come up with inventive ideas to keep their children engaged and focused. Parents with poor mental health have viewed any home schooling negatively due to their own low moods…The increase in low moods or severity of the moods prevents the parent being emotionally available to the child/ren to some extent."

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"I have spoken to many parents that reported they are struggling with mental health, depression, anxiety and are not coping well. They reported that they are tired and home schooling is difficult for them due to many reasons. [There is a] lack of parenting strategies to develop routine that enable home schooling, [and a] lack of knowledge to support their children. They are just stressed out. Being in isolation

with all the children 24/7 for around 100 days is stressful. If we add to it poor mental wellbeing, the outcome will be non-coping parents."

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"It has been extremely difficult for all our families. They are living together in a shared often noisy and distractive environment. They have not always had access to the internet and electronic equipment to assist them and because of parental mental health issues there has often been a lack of willingness to engage in school and other activities."

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"Parents in my area have struggled - many parents have their own mental health problems and limited education so are unable to home school their children. Many households have several children with a range of ages, no calm place to work, motivation issues, and live in a chaotic way with no routines. This has been extremely challenging for a majority of families in my area and very little school learning will have occurred."

Challenges returning to school post - COVID-19

When asked what will be the main challenge for children and young people returning to education, getting back into a routine and catching up on missed work stood out as the main concerns for frontline workers, with over 30% of respondents highlighting this as their primary concern. Having months out of education, living in chaotic environments with disrupted routines and no formal education will make it very difficult for children to adjust back to routines within school. It was commonly noted that children in poverty and crisis are often already behind their peers, and will have missed a much larger amount of work than peers with calmer and better equipped learning environments. 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. Frontline workers are also concerned about the safety elements of returning to school; 19% of respondents noted their worries with regards to children adjusting to a "new normal" where the school environment is not something it once was, with smaller class sizes and distancing measures, and the worries that children will have reintegrating, particularly when families have been self-isolating due to health concerns.

"A lot of our young people are already disadvantaged and likely to be behind their peers. The lack of schoolwork and access to internet means they will fall further behind, creating more inequality. Children will be embarrassed, and we are likely to see a spike in non-school attendees."

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"[The biggest challenge is] being further behind educationally, as the poorest children tend to be further behind their peers normally… not doing any work for 4 months sets them back further from peers."

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"All children will have had different experiences of home schooling and may not have been able to achieve anything where others may have excelled. Routines may also be an issue as most children will have spent a lot more time in bed and not in their normal routine."

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"The gap between the children that have had good home school learning and children that have not will be greater than ever before."

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"The biggest challenge is going to be keeping the children's attention. There will also be peers that are at different stages in their education, especially in maths and English. Some children may need extra lessons to catch up. Funding for this would be a fantastic idea; if after school workshops were able for free for children who need that extra support."

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"The gap in knowledge and the change in routine will be challenging for children who have experienced domestic violence and abuse as many have been unable to access the curriculum and have already experienced vast changes in their life and routine that another change may be too much for some children to manage. There may be emotional and behavioural challenges that arise in school once children return."

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. 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. 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 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 statutory 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 plans for the recovery. 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 on 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.

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-term solutions to the 'digital divide'.
- Initiatives that bring together charities, the public and private sectors to find ways to tackle the issues facing the most vulnerable families collectively.

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 the 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.

Website: www.buttleuk.org

Twitter and Instagram: @buttleuk

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