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The State of Child Poverty 2024

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PLEASE NOTE:

This report examines sensitive topics. Quotes from respondents refer to domestic violence, sexual abuse, suicide, self-harm and severe financial hardship. Descriptions of the lived experience of poverty populate this report. Many are upsetting and distressing. Please consider this before reading.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the sixth year we have published a State of Child Poverty report. This year, we heard from just over 1,000 frontline professionals working with approximately **150,000** children. They reported that **58%** of these children live in **destitution**, and their responses outline the appalling standard of living that these families face in 2024.

Through the public narrative surrounding the cost-of-living crisis is beginning to indicate that the worst is past, we know that the cost-of-living crisis is continuing to have a serious impact on households living in poverty. Years of its worst impacts are having a cumulative effect. Comparing this year's responses to the 2023 responses, we have seen little improvement, with increases in the proportion of respondents linking the rising costs of basic items and services and the severity of their financial hardship, demonstrating increasing income precarity. Respondents told us that of the families they support:

- 53% cannot afford enough food and nutrition, while 55% cannot afford utilities
- 59% go without basic furniture such as beds, sofas and appliances
- 50% cannot afford children's clothes or toys, while 47% are unable to afford to clean their homes or clothes.
- 48% are not able to afford their rent or equivalent
- 64% go without IT equipment for education or employment

Over half can't afford enough food, gas, or electricity, and 91% of respondents told us that the impacts of poverty have worsened as a result of the recent cost increases of these items. The lived experience of this is shocking. Many families are skipping meals; some households are down to eating only one meal a day. The food they can afford lacks both nutritional value and quantity, leading to serious issues with tooth decay, weight changes, and physical illness. Foodbanks were cited as critical services for these households, but some families are stretching out food parcels beyond the intended amount, to make them last longer.

In addition to being unable to afford these absolute basics, we heard fears that more families than ever simply cannot afford their rent. Rents are so high that families are being made homeless or forced to live in squalor. The conditions they endure are degrading and unliveable, including pervasive mould, widespread damp, and severe overcrowding. 47% of families can't afford to clean their homes or belongings, exacerbating appalling living conditions.

Children living within these homes are seeing their futures curtailed. They can't engage in their education because they are tired and hungry. They can't sleep because of hunger, overcrowding or they are lacking a bed (28% of households). These factors create and exacerbate mental health issues, particularly anxiety and stress. All of these factors contribute to poor school attendance. However, attendance is also limited by tangible factors such as lacking the uniforms or transport required to attend, nor can they afford the practical resources required to support learning at home such as laptops (64%) and internet access (48%).

Respondents to our survey reported high levels of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which have been increasing year-on-year since we first captured them in 2021. These describe the types of crisis and trauma that children and young people living in poverty are experiencing.

The highest reported five include:

- Mental illness is present in 70% of the households, increasing 7% points since 2021
- Domestic violence in 64% of the households, increasing 5% points since 2021
- Neglect in 55% of the households, increasing 7% points since 2021
- Parental separation in 71% of the households, increasing 8% points since 2021

- Verbal abuse in 66% of the households, increasing 5% points since 2021

These ACEs reflect the immense strain that financial hardship puts on family relationships. For the families that these frontline workers support, forms of mistreatment - domestic violence, verbal abuse, physical abuse, neglect – are not only common; their rates are rising.

Respondents also reported that close to half of families in poverty are experiencing alcohol abuse (47%) in their households, followed closely by drug use (42%). They told us about the toxic impacts of witnessing these activities in the home, and the increased likelihood that young people themselves may reflect these behaviours as a coping mechanism. This is leading to exploitation and higher risk of criminal activity, both for children and their parents.

Our survey asked frontline workers to describe any changes in severity for these ACEs that they have witnessed over the last 12 months, not just the prevalence. Mental illness saw one of the strongest changes, with a 93% net increase in severity. Written responses outline the relentless stress, anxiety and depression that parents and carers experience, balancing parenting while enduring extremely low standards of living. These same stresses are most likely factors in the other severe changes reported, particularly in the worsening of domestic violence (+82%), neglect (+84%), verbal abuse (+79%) and physical abuse (+65%).

These multiple challenges are having severe impacts on the wellbeing of children and young people. We measure wellbeing not just as mental health, but also family relationships, friendships, and behaviour. In 2024, we saw a rise across all five key measures of wellbeing yet again. 71% of children and young people are reported as suffering mental health problems, now 20 percentage points higher than the same recorded measure in 2020.

This pace is almost matched by the rise in behavioural problems, too, which now present in 67% of the children and young people the frontline workers are supporting. Respondents told us that these challenges are explained by:

- Children and young people having little control over their circumstances, so they seek control in ways that are destructive, such as self-harm, self-neglect, eating disorders, suicidal ideation, and attempts on their own lives.
- Children experiencing jealousy, anger, isolation, and resentment on seeing their peers access opportunities that are out of their reach. They simply cannot access the same spaces, because they do not have the money, transport, or wellbeing.
- Overcrowding, low privacy, and uncomfortable furnishings (or lack of), leave children without a safe space to escape or recover at home.
- Parents have an extremely diminished capacity to care for their children's mental health, when their own is so depleted. They struggle to control behaviour and set boundaries, and lack the means to reward good behaviour, provide celebrations, or take children on days out.
- Bullying is rife. Children in poverty are treated poorly by their peers because of their differences, and this profoundly influences their sense of worth and self-esteem.

The issues outlined regarding education are extensive. Frontline workers told us that **66%** of the children and young people they support were struggling to engage in their education. **63%** were falling behind as a result of the high cost-of-living. These are 3 percentage points higher than the same measures in 2023. 99% of all respondents reported that mental and physical health issues of children and parents, as well as dealing with the trauma caused by ACEs, were making all aspects of education harder, including attendance, attainment, and engagement. The excessive worry and anxiety that children experience contributes to their declining mental health and poor capacity to engage in their learning, compounded by the lack of items and resources they need to access educational resources.

97% of respondents told us that access to food and poor housing conditions are also making access to education even harder. Children are clearly struggling to learn in homes that are not equipped or set

up for learning, which is where additional provision from schools may be instrumental. Their diminished capacity to learn leads to further negative internal and external perceptions of their abilities. We heard that for young people trying to access further education or finish their secondary education, many are dropping out or failing to achieve their potential. This is attributed to the multiple factors outlined here, but also because of strong pressures to earn money to contribute to their household income.

When we asked frontline workers to describe the employment patterns and challenges they are seeing, it was clear that the very severe impacts of poor health, trauma, and abuse in the home are leading to families having the dual impact of low to no income, and high needs. 64% of households have applied for Universal Credit in the last year, while 63% have been unemployed, and 44% have faced a reduction in income. Reduced spending power due to the cost-of-living crisis coupled with real-term reductions in income is having catastrophic effects on households in poverty. Taking on extra hours or additional jobs is further reducing opportunities to build relationships and support between parent and child. It also adds stress and overwork in homes where tensions are high, and wellbeing is poor.

Frontline services are facing significant challenges in supporting these multiple needs, due to complex, overwhelming caseloads and long-term underfunding. Service availability is reportedly worse in 2024 than any single year we have previously measured. The most commonly required services are not from one particular sector. There are gaps and major stress points across all services and frontline support. The respondents to our survey told us that 70% of the families they work with need mental health support, while 63% required support with housing and 59% support for utility bills. However, the net change in service availability fell by 51%, 56%, and 23% respectively for each of these crucial services.

One of the key findings of this report is the evidence the frontline workers have reported regarding the extreme challenges that families are enduring, and the challenge to respond within their own services. They speak overwhelmingly of internal pressures, and the almost complete breakdown of support services for families in poverty, with a mixture of anger, frustration and embarrassment. It is clear that services are not only insufficient, but occasionally inefficient too, as expressed by a number of frustrated respondents; funding is poorly applied, failing to meet need yet not delivering value either. Many feel that their service has been unable to enact its primary purpose, which triggers a growing cycle of poverty and crisis. Because families are no longer being supported after experiences such as abuse and the lived experience of poverty, the root cause of mental health crises are no longer being addressed.

As a result of these findings, Buttle UK has the following calls to action:

- We stand behind the Child Poverty Strategy¹ due to be published in Spring 2025. We support the commitment to reducing essential costs, particularly those acting as barriers to education, as well commitments to providing better local support, particularly focusing on children's early years, with work on improving access and the quality of necessary services. We support the '8 Tests' proposed by the End Child Poverty Coalition² to hold this strategy to account when it is published.
- We continue to stand with End Child Poverty's call for the lifting of the two-child limit in their All Kids Count Campaign. The two-child limit significantly reduces household income and wellbeing. A quarter of a million children would be lifted out of poverty if it was scrapped³. We stand by this call, and have done since it was announced in 2023, because we know the two-child limit is a negative factor in many of the conclusions made in this report.

¹ [GOV.UK | Child Poverty Strategy](#)

² [End Child Poverty | 8 Tests](#)

³ [Child Poverty Action Group | All Kids Count Campaign](#)

- The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust are continuing to advocate for an uplift in Universal Credit payments, which they demonstrate are not adequate to cover the basic cost of living for low-income households. We stand behind their Guarantee our Essentials campaign, which is proposing an independent process to regularly determine an ‘essentials guarantee level’⁴.
- We stand with the Crushed by a Million Pressures campaign being led by Young Minds⁵, which calls on the government to stand on their election promises to support and improve the mental health crisis we are seeing for children and young people. The campaign calls for the provision of early support hubs with an open-access approach to mental health support. It also calls on the government to tackle poverty and discrimination, which they argue acts as a root cause of youth mental health crises, and are campaigning for the involvement of young people more directly in policies surrounding mental health.



⁴ [Joseph Rowntree Foundation | Essentials Guarantee](#)

⁵ [Young Minds | Crushed by a Million Pressures](#)

66

I worked with a nursery aged child who was hospitalised due to malnourishment which caused a heart condition, and all of her teeth required to be removed (Glasgow, Scotland)

66

I am working with twins aged 6 who had never slept in beds until 3 months ago (East Yorkshire, England)

66

We have children that are covered in nits because parents can't afford the medication (East Sussex, England)

66

I have seen children being given a slice of toast for breakfast, a cheap milkshake carton for lunch and then a bowl of pasta for dinner, then going to bed hungry (Kent, England)

66

I had three children sharing a double bed with grandmother – the home was dilapidated and they ended up going into care as the home was not suitable (Gloucestershire, England)

66

We have a single dad of 4 children [whose] rent has increased from £550 to £850. Dad is working over 70 hours a week, on a zero-hour contract. They were storing chilled foods in cold water and cooking on a camping stove (Derbyshire, England)

66

I have a pair of sisters sharing 1 pair of jeans between them (Northamptonshire, England)

66

I am supporting a family of 3 children and a mother who fled domestic violence. They were accommodated in a hotel sharing 1 room. The hotel has no cooking facilities. The family spent 6 months in this hotel room (London, England)

66

We have children who never leave their street all summer long and never experience anything else (Lincolnshire, England)

66

As a service we gave out some toothbrushes and toothpaste, it was very telling how excited the children were to receive these items (Hertfordshire, England)

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

This report sets out the reality for children growing up in some of the most disadvantaged households across the UK. In 2024, we learnt that the number stands at 4.3 million children living in poverty in the UK⁶, in appalling figures published by the government. At Buttle UK, we have been providing grants for children and young people for over 70 years, supporting households facing overwhelming challenges like domestic violence, estrangement, refugee crises, serious mental or physical illness, addiction, and more — all while dealing with the challenges of severe financial hardship. Our grant-making model provides packages of items and activities to help overcome these challenges, delivered by workers from across the frontline.

Just over 1,000 people responded to our sixth annual survey. These support workers, from diverse services such as family support, public health, social services, housing and education, know the severe adversities that children and young people are facing. They see firsthand the homes that lack basic furniture and furnishings, and the severe impact on children's learning, relationships, and wellbeing. Their applications for Buttle UK grants detail the wider context that makes their circumstances much more challenging. This report explores this context, worsened by the appalling standards of living that too many are enduring.

Survey respondents

Our sixth annual State of Child Poverty survey was open to respondents in Summer 2024. Invites were sent to the network of frontline workers who have applied for a Buttle UK grant within the last five years, from across all four nations of the UK. We received 1,011 responses from support workers working with approximately 151,000 children and young people every year. They were asked a series of questions across the following themes:

- The affordability and accessibility of essential items and services, such as food, utilities, transport, and items for education and the home.
- The rate and severity of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) the children they engage with are experiencing.
- Children's mental health, capacity to engage in education, and barriers to both.
- The support that families need and the availability of key services.

In 2024, almost a third of respondents were from social services, increasing by 5 percentage points since 2023. The second largest group came from other Local Authority services, representing just under a fifth of all respondents. The single largest drop in respondents, dropping 10 percentage points since 2023, were from the voluntary sector. We have seen a drop in applications to us from charities over the last 2-3 years, which we have attributed to increasing strain, reduction and closure of these organisations. Aside from the higher numbers from social services, the spread of respondents from a range of services was fairly representative.

⁶ [Child Poverty Action Group | Poverty: facts and figures](#)

Table 1. Breakdown of respondents by sector

Sector	Number	Percentage
Social Services	326	32%
Local Authority (non-Social Services)	190	19%
Charity / Voluntary	144	14%
Other / Mixed Sector Worker	139	14%
Housing Provider / Supported Accommodation	97	10%
Education	85	8%
Public Health / NHS	30	3%
	1,011	100%

These shifting proportions have changed the representation of the client groups that our survey respondents support, as seen in Table 2. Nearly half of all respondents worked with families in a role related to Child Protection or Family Support, with just over a quarter specifically working with families with statutory intervention, such as a Child in Need Plan (CiN) or Child Protection Plan (CPP). This reflects the high levels of social service respondents and represents a 6-percentage point increase on the 2023 report. Domestic Abuse support workers and Early Help were also well represented in this cohort.

Table 2. Breakdown of respondents by client group

Client Group	Proportions by client group (%)	
	2023	2024
Child Protection / Child in Need	20%	26%
Family Support	19%	22%
Domestic Abuse	19%	17%
Early Help	13%	14%
Housing / Homelessness	11%	7%
Looked After Children	4%	2%
Estranged Young People	4%	2%
Asylum Seekers / Refugees	2%	2%
Young Parents	2%	1%
Kinship Care	1%	1%
Other / Mixed Client Group	6%	6%

Please note that certain language is used in the interests of brevity. This includes the use of the term 'parent', where in all circumstances this should be taken to mean 'parents and carers'. We also use the word 'children' in place of the phrase 'children and young people', but our meaning should be taken to include all age groups up to 18 unless otherwise specified.



OUR FINDINGS

Section 1: Destitution

In 2024, frontline workers reported that **58%** of children they support live in **destitution**. For this survey cohort, this represents **87,500** children and young people. This proportion is approximately level with the 2023 study (60%) and significantly higher than the 45% reported in 2022 and 36% in 2021 respectively.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) define destitution as going without at least two of the following in the past month:

- **Shelter**, e.g., sleeping rough for one or more nights
- **Food**, e.g., having fewer than two daily meals for more than one day
- **Lighting**, e.g., being unable to light a home for five or more days
- **Heating**, e.g., being unable to heat a home for five or more days
- **Clothing**, e.g., being unable to dress appropriately for the weather
- **Basic toiletries**, e.g., lacking soap, shampoo, toothpaste, toothbrush etc.

The results of this survey emphasise these circumstances as the reality for the majority of families that our respondents support. While respondents have not identified all families as living in destitution, it is quite clear that their standards of living are exceptionally poor, and likely to leave many on the edge of destitution. In our recent Growing Up in Poverty (GUIP) report⁷ over 1,500 parents were asked the same question. 81% of them identified themselves as lacking two or more of these essentials, indicating that the number may well be higher than even the frontline services report.

We explore how it is to live in destitution, or close to it, by asking about families' capacity to afford the most basic items. The results of this question are presented in Table 3.

Item affordability	Average proportion of families (%)
Unable to afford basic household items e.g. furniture, appliances, utensils	59%
Unable to afford food	53%
Unable to afford basic items for children e.g. clothes, toys	50%
Unable to afford gas / electric	55%
Unable to make rent payments	48%
Unable to afford to clean the home, clothes, bedding	47%
Children / young people without a bed to sleep in	28%
Unable to afford IT equipment	64%
Unable to afford internet access	49%

⁷ [Growing Up in Poverty](#)

1.1 Hunger, Shelter and Warmth

The proportion of households struggling to afford basics remains extremely high. Over half of all families were reported as being unable to afford food (53%) and utilities (55%). This is resulting in falling standards of living, with many parents and carers making difficult choices to cut back on meals in the household and going without heating or washing for long stretches of time. Just like the families in our GUIP report, frontline workers highlight the appalling impacts of these choices.

Shelter is a fundamental need. Worryingly, close to half of families were reported as not being able to afford their rent or mortgage. In the 2023 report, frontline workers indicated that one of their most pressing concerns was a burgeoning housing crisis for families. Many spoke then, and now, of the decisions that families are making between heating and eating, and shared concerns that the next step is defaulting on rent payments, which leaves so many in the precarious position of being close to – or tipping into - homelessness. It appears that these fears are being realised in 2024. Families are forced to choose between paying higher rents for properties which meet basic living standards, leaving them with no money for living costs, or paying cheaper rents to live in properties which fail to keep them healthy, warm and clean.

“ There are families who are so desperate for housing and are private renting, struggling to pay £700 per month for properties which are horrendously maintained, unclean, lacking decoration and aren't healthy environments for children (North Yorkshire, England)

“ I have a family living in a property with a private landlord who has been served an improvement notice. He has put the rent up to £750 to try and recover money for works needed to be completed. All of their beds are covered in mould and they all have chest problems (Merseyside, England)

“ Several families I support are living in council housing where there is damp/mould, broken windows, contaminated water supply, etc. This is having direct impact on children's health with health professionals stating that children's health conditions could have been avoided if they had been living in appropriate housing (Edinburgh, Scotland)

One respondent told us that the standards that families endure are simply 'shocking' because they just cannot afford better. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that 59% of families were reported as being unable to afford basic furniture or that 28% of families could not afford beds for their children. We know that many sleep on floors, airbeds, and sofas, or in some cases, bed share with their parents beyond an age that is dignified or suitable. One respondent told us that they knew of a family with children aged 2, 3 and 14 without a single bed in the house; another disclosed that three children were sharing one bed with their grandmother. Frontline workers speak routinely of empty homes, uncarpeted bare floors, and cold, unwelcoming spaces for children to grow up in.

“ Bedrooms not feeling like a safe, comfortable space with appropriate furniture has led to clients not having a safe space of their own and spending increased amount of time out late/running away/with older individuals as they do not want to return home (Devon, England)

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[They're] unable to have friends over to their home, no social skills, isolation...living in their pyjamas and dressing gown as the home is so cold and no money to put gas on (Merseyside, England)

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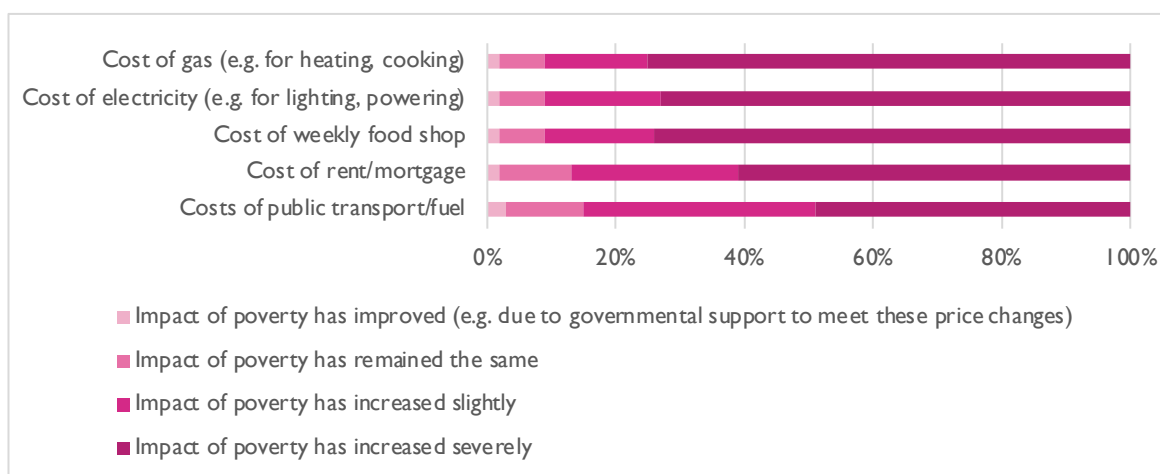
Young people are sleeping in overcrowded homes on mattresses on the floor, sometimes without adequate bedding, or they are sleeping on sofas. Young people report feeling stressed and affected by the tensions in the home surrounding poverty (Hampshire, England)

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I work with children that live on meal deals and haven't had a cooked meal. The homes are often awful, social housing doesn't supply flooring in many cases, so children are living in cold, mouldy, homes which has an impact on their physical health (East Sussex, England)

We know that the cost-of-living crisis has been instrumental in worsening families' capacity to meet these fundamental needs. While it is clear that it has tipped many households into financial hardship, our survey asked frontline workers to rate the impact of the increasing costs of basic services and goods on families already living in poverty, as shown in Chart 1. The results are stark. 61% of respondents reported that the rising costs of housing had increased the impacts of financial hardship severely. This is 8-percentage points higher than in 2023, further evidencing the increasing precarity of families' housing situations. It does not seem likely that housing costs are going to decrease in the immediate future.

Chart 1. The changing impact of poverty



Approximately three-quarters of respondents reported that the rising costs of gas, electricity, and food shopping had made the impacts of financial hardship much worse. Food insecurity and hunger is chronic and widespread. This is an issue with both the quantity of the food and the quality. A significant majority of those describing food insecurity told us that families are skipping meals every single day, with some down to only one meal a day. We heard that this is causing a rise in children stealing food or relying on friends to feed them because there is not enough food in their own homes. One respondent told us about children stealing food from others' lunchboxes because they were so desperate. Another said that a young person they support was making a three-day foodbank parcel last a fortnight.

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They eat less fresh produce as it is more expensive, and more tinned and dry, and sweet or salty, cheaper carbs (Lanarkshire, Scotland)

“ I observed a mother dish up dinner for four children. The mother put stew into a large bowl and each child had four spoons of stew and then passed the bowl and spoon round the table to the next child (Derbyshire, England)

“ They are hungry because their parents could not afford to feed them a nutritious breakfast...their parents have to sell devices to pay for food, they are accessing food banks but this is not nutritious food and is limited to how many they can have. This does not cover a week's supply (Merseyside, England)

The physical health impacts of going without enough food, or the right food, are very serious. Many responses alluded to the unhealthy choices that parents have to make when it comes to purchasing food, including consuming out-of-date food. Sadly, services such as foodbanks are sometimes limited in the array of food they can provide, lacking fresh produce in particular. Frontline workers tell us that families have poor dental health, with frequent extractions due to decay. There is also a rampant increase in (or exacerbation) of health conditions such as diabetes and malnutrition, because families don't have access to a suitable diet. In one example, we were told that a nursery-aged child had been hospitalised due to malnourishment; this had caused a heart condition and required the removal of all of her teeth.

“ The families have become very vulnerable; we have had a lot of illnesses where families are unable to heat their homes or the foods they are eating are not maybe in date as they can get them cheaper (Vale of Glamorgan, Wales)

“ 4 mothers within the last 6 months have reported that they worry about what health outcomes may happen to their child since they cannot afford healthier food choices due to the rising cost of living” (Anonymous, England)

“ We have young adults who have had poor physical health due to malnutrition with not being able to buy enough food as the prices have increased so much (Cumbria, England)

“ The young people I work with seem to struggle with weight management too, due to accessing the cheapest foods available, or limited food (Devon, England)

The wider impacts are serious, too. We learnt that children are turning up at school so hungry that they cannot concentrate. They experience anxiety and stress due to their hunger which further diminishes their capacity to engage. Worse, we heard repeatedly that children cannot sleep due to hunger, which then leaves them too tired to learn. One referrer told us that it is common for their clients to fall asleep in class, and several told us that the schools they work with are having to provide spaces for rest and cooking for hungry students. This is a cause for concern when schools shut; the school holidays and even the weekends leave children at serious risk of hunger.

“ Worrying about feeling hungry in school holidays has also been an obvious concern for some children and cause anxiety (County Antrim, Northern Ireland)

“ Meals have been reduced (portion size and less meat), mum will miss meals and no treats for the children which in turn means that the children go to bed hungry and find it difficult to sleep throughout the night...they will often wake up and unable to wake in the morning to attend school (London, England)

“ Children eat a hot regular meal at school, but parents are struggling to feed the children on weekends and school holidays. No child should go hungry, it has a huge impact on their mental health and wellbeing (West Midlands, England)

“ We have children arriving in the morning hungry, dirty and unprepared for the day. We then have to meet basic needs before we begin to try to educate them. We have to nurture and care for the children meeting their basic physical and mental needs daily (Cheshire, England)

Only 7% of respondents felt that there had been no particular impact of the cost-of-living crisis on essentials such as food, gas and electricity, for families already living in poverty. Next to none reported an improvement as a result of additional statutory intervention. These stark results highlight the exceptional challenges that households in financial hardship continue to face. As the public discourse about the cost-of-living evolves, particularly the quietly rising belief that the crisis is at an end, it is important to point to this evidence that, for many, there is no end in sight.



“ Her uniform hangs off her body and is stained. Her hair is messy and she itches from nits. Other children avoid her and she hears whispers that she smells. She is pulled out of class and given a bagel as a TA notices her stomach is rumbling. There is no clear space to do homework at home, not a table or chair to use. She is sat on the sofa eating a bag of crisps for her tea, fleas crawl on the cushions (Greater Manchester, England)

“ A parent was evicted from the property with her 2 children and forced to spend 2 nights sleeping in the A&E department of the local hospital (London, England)

“ We have a student who accesses us, who looks thin, tired, and sad. He has experienced multiple ACES. He presents in school as hungry, and friends have been seen giving him food. He is really self-conscious about this though. He often smells unpleasant (Hampshire, England)

“ A child taking a lunch box to school empty. She goes to a breakfast club, and she has a free school meal. At the end of the day, the local foodbank operates out of the school. The child fills her lunch box with enough food for her and her family to eat that night. The next day the same thing happens.... and on and on... (London, England)

“ [I see a] high percentage of children going to school hungry, not having had breakfast with too small, holey, dirty clothes as the families can't afford to run the washing machine” (Norfolk, England)

“ No child I work with plays a musical instrument. No child I work with goes camping with their carer. Most children I work with do not go on holiday with their carers. Most children cannot attend school trip organised by school because the families cannot afford it” (London, England)

“ A mother fled domestic violence. She cannot afford clothes or nappies for her baby (London, England)

1.2 Prioritisation and sacrifice

Although we consider all the items and services outlined in Table 3 to be essential, it is clear that households are having to prioritise to make ends meet. This is resulting in a hierarchy, in which certain needs are put aside to make sure others are covered. According to frontline workers, 50% of families are unable to afford the clothes and toys that their children need, and close to half of families are reported as being unable to clean their homes and belongings. This leaves children poorly dressed and experiencing poor hygiene, which have repercussions for their overall social and physical wellbeing. Respondents described children and young people as socially alienated.

“Children’s homes are often not ‘homely’ or give a feeling of safety to the child...their homes may not be very clean, causing poor physical health. These things can cause bedding to be dirty in particular or if they are only sleeping on mattresses, make these dirty, affecting the ability to be able to have a good sleep (Cornwall, England)”

“Many families I suspect are using less cleaning products, washing and bathing less frequently and having less food/drink items – these adjustments will impact over time but not always glaringly obvious (Powys, Wales)”

“[Lacking basics] negatively impacts their mental health, not only by not having the basic items they need day to day, but then not wanting or being able to go to school as they may not have the correct uniform, not have facilities to have a wash, have clothes washed (Merseyside, England)”

Worryingly, 64% report that families can’t afford essential IT equipment. This may not seem a priority in the face of meeting basic needs such as hunger, hygiene and warmth. However, children who lack toys, books, and devices to access learning from home, are strongly disadvantaged against their peers. Being held back in their learning and education significantly impacts their future prospects. Respondents also told us that children are getting into trouble for not completing their homework. This is despite many children and young people using their lunch breaks, friends’ laptops, and school libraries to the best of their ability to keep up. Parents are also facing repercussions for their children’s poor attendance, even though this is a result of lacking uniform, resources, or transport for their children.

“The education system is failing children with additional needs and especially low-income families. Fining parents for poor attendance is only adding to the pressures (Tyne and Wear, England)”

“Schools send young people home for not having the right shoes, trousers/skirts, shirts, jackets etc. Parents try their best, but often are unable to purchase everything, especially if there’s more than one child and they are at the age where they grow rapidly (Glasgow, Scotland)”

“ Schools use online resources, parent pay, parent mail. Secondary school have their timetables as an app on a smartphone – all added pressures on families to get something to allow for access to internet to use the resources (Cardiff, Wales)

Due to the sacrifices that parents are making, children and young people are increasingly aware of their social differences. Many respondents alluded to children knowing too much about the stress their households are under, and how this sets them apart from their peers. This leaves them isolated, withdrawn, and angry at their situation. This resentment causes fractures in familial relationships, with some respondents indicating that they are seeing increasing numbers of family breakdowns and conflicts, including young people running away from home.

“ Young people feel excluded and isolated. Often pulling away from connections with their peers. There is also worry about cost of living – we sourced a PC for a 10-year-old. First thing he asked was how many pennies it will cost in electricity use per hour, that’s not something his peers think about (Edinburgh, Scotland)

“ Young individuals and children in these households have been deprived of learning opportunities, which has led to stress and mental strain when grappling with academic concepts. The financial constraints faced by their parents have strained family relationships (London, England)

“ These young individuals and children often feel singled out and discriminated against by their peers due to their inability to access basic necessities, adding unnecessary pressure to both the individual and the entire family (London, England)



Section 2: Adverse Childhood Experiences

Households living in severe financial hardship are under immense pressure. This has a ripple effect, causing or being caused by wider challenges in the home. For children, these challenges can become Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). We asked survey respondents to rate the prevalence of these ACEs in the households they support.

Table 4. Prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse Childhood Experience	% of families				Difference 2021-2024
	2021	2022	2023	2024	
Parental Separation	63%	67%	69%	71%	+8%
Mental Illness in the Family	63%	68%	70%	70%	+7%
Verbal Abuse	61%	63%	65%	66%	+5%
Domestic Violence	59%	63%	64%	64%	+5%
Neglect	48%	54%	55%	55%	+7%
Parent/Carer Physical Illness or Disability	44%	49%	50%	51%	+7%
Physical Abuse	44%	45%	47%	47%	+3%
Alcohol Abuse in the Family	39%	45%	45%	46%	+7%
Drug Use in the Family	37%	42%	42%	42%	+5%
Bereavement of a Family Member	28%	30%	31%	31%	+3%
Sexual Abuse	22%	26%	27%	27%	+5%
Imprisonment of a Family Member	20%	23%	25%	25%	+5%

We have been collecting this data year-on-year since 2021 and can track the rates at which frontline workers are reporting ACEs for children living in poverty. The results are stark; in the last year alone, we saw steady percentage increases for many of the recorded ACEs. Even where they have remained stable between 2023 and 2024, they have followed years of prior increases.

66 There has been a marked increase on domestic abuse within the home, which then impacts on the children and parents...in all my 20 odd years in this post, I have never seen our families struggle so much and the impact on their own emotional wellbeing as parents (Kent, England)

66 The children I work with have become accustomed to going without. Their lives are bleak and without joy, they don't have the opportunity for quality family time or activities (Greater Manchester, England)

66 Children are facing neglect as a result of poverty. This looks like inadequate nutrition leading to obesity or malnourishment, dirty/cluttered housing, and lack of proper provision for beds (London, England)

Parental separation is the single most common factor in the households that frontline workers are supporting. This reflects the immense strain that financial hardship puts on family relationships, which is similarly reflected in the high proportion of households with mental illness. For the families that these frontline workers support, forms of mistreatment - domestic violence, verbal abuse, physical abuse, neglect – are not only common; their rates are rising.

Substance abuse is one example of a negative coping strategy with serious impacts on families. Almost half of all families were reported as being affected by alcohol abuse in 2024, closely followed by drug abuse in 42% of households. Many respondents spoke about the toxic impacts of witnessing these activities in the home, and the increased likelihood that young people themselves reflect these behaviours as a coping mechanism. This is compounded by other factors caused by their financial hardship, leading to exploitation and higher risk of criminal activity, both for children and their parents.

“Children are far more likely to be susceptible to exploitation and criminality/gang affiliation. Children’s mental health is affected, where they will self-harm as a coping mechanism or turn to drugs or solvent abuse to cope with their circumstances (Bedfordshire, England)”

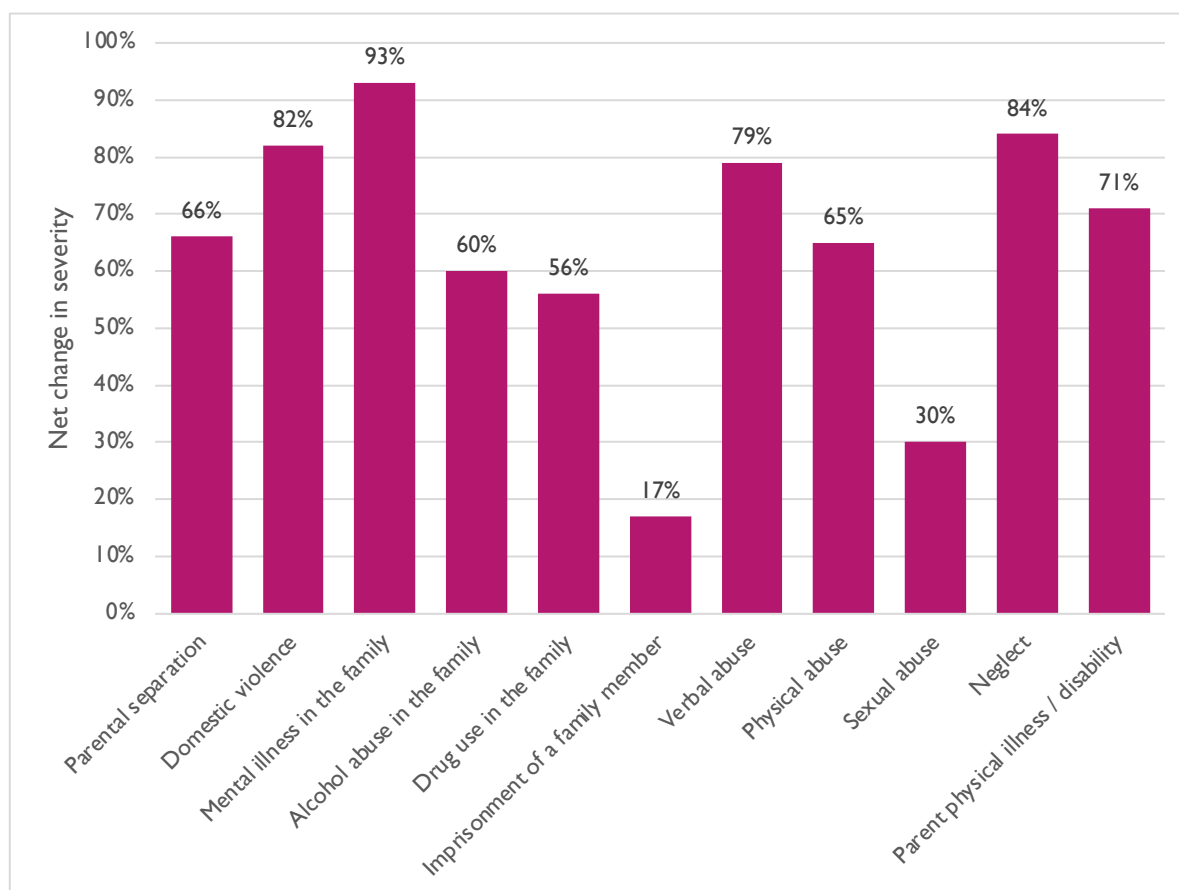
“Since children depend on their carers for their needs to be met, if they aren’t then it proves that they are failing and sometimes push them into making negative life choices like selling drugs (Anonymous, England)”

“Children become more isolated, choosing to become involved with gangs who dupe them into thinking they are their new families, who will love and take care of them – this then leads to drug taking/selling/county lines, criminal and sexual exploitation, sadly drug addiction, pregnancies, sexual abuse, and traumatic events (North Ayrshire, Scotland)”

These are both examples of mental health crises, and factors that worsen existing mental illness. However, the survey respondents also report rises in physical health problems for parents and carers, rising 7-percentage points to 51%. Frontline workers describe the interaction between poor nutrition, high stress, and exceptionally low living standards, particularly damp and mould. Sustaining wellbeing is a serious challenge for families in financial hardship.



Chart 2. The changing severity of ACEs



We also asked frontline workers to report any changes in severity of these ACEs over the last year. We asked them to indicate whether there had been any improvement (as a result of intervention or support), deterioration, or no impact, as a result of the financial challenges these households are facing. The net changes are displayed in Chart 2, demonstrating where the relationship between financial hardship and the worsening of ACEs is strongest.

With a 93% net increase in severity, it is clear that frontline workers see a strong link between poverty and mental illness. Their written responses outline the relentless stress, anxiety and depression that parents, carers and children experience, with the former balancing parenting while enduring extremely low standards of living. These same stresses are most likely factors in the other severe changes reported, particularly in the worsening of domestic violence (+82%), neglect (+84%), verbal abuse (+79%) and physical abuse (+65%).

These net changes in severity are higher than the same measures recorded in 2023. Parental separation climbed 8 percentage points, while parental illness and disability increased by 7 percentage points. Neglect was 5 percentage points higher. All other measures were also between 1-4 percentage points higher in 2024; severity increased across the board in 2024. This indicates that, even where the rates of ACEs can be said to be climbing more slowly year-on-year, the severity of these ACEs is climbing with comparative rapidity. In light of the financial challenges families are facing, this is unsurprising. The impacts for young people will last a lifetime.

66
The young people we work with are so deeply affected by past and ongoing traumatic experiences that they are really dysregulated, operating from fight or flight and unable to cope with day-to-day school life or concentrate effectively (Cumbria, England)

“ [They have] reduced chances of social mobility and ability to experience new things, resulting in them being depressed and low (Anonymous, England)

“ Young people are dealing with high levels of stress and uncertainty. A lot of young people self-medicate and are turning to friends and social life to fulfil them rather than looking to gain qualifications and employment (Merseyside, England)



“ [I have] children in such terrible accommodation they cannot wash or eat hot food at all (London, England)

“ A family of 5 children, they have poor home conditions with little furniture. They shared 3 broken beds and had no bedding. Food was limited and school attendance was poor, the older sibling was looking after the younger 4. Mum stole food from the local supermarket. Families like this are common in the UK today (West Midlands, England)

“ [I have] older children aged 16+ having to go into supported accommodation and claim Universal Credit as parents can no longer afford to accommodate them with younger siblings. They then live in a hostel, having to access food parcels for 8–10 weeks waiting for benefit claim to be processed (West Yorkshire, England)

“ I work with a young person who has lost their mother to suicide due to the impact of the financial crisis, his family members are struggling to support him and are currently not entitled any additional funding” (Tyne and Wear, England)

“ I support a mother who has 9 children who works 6 days a week to be able to provide for the children, however this impacts on her ability to spend quality time with her children (Lancashire, England)

“ Two children coming from Afghanistan, Dad brought them here due to war in their own country. The boys sleep on the floor as there is only one bedroom (London, England)

“ A young person that was not able to access going to school as she did not have the correct shoes, parents had to wait for benefits to come in before they could purchase a pair” (Leicestershire, England)

“ I have one family of 11 living in one room. This has been ongoing for 3 years, parents are unable to work. The relationship between children and parents is strained and they struggle financially (London, England)

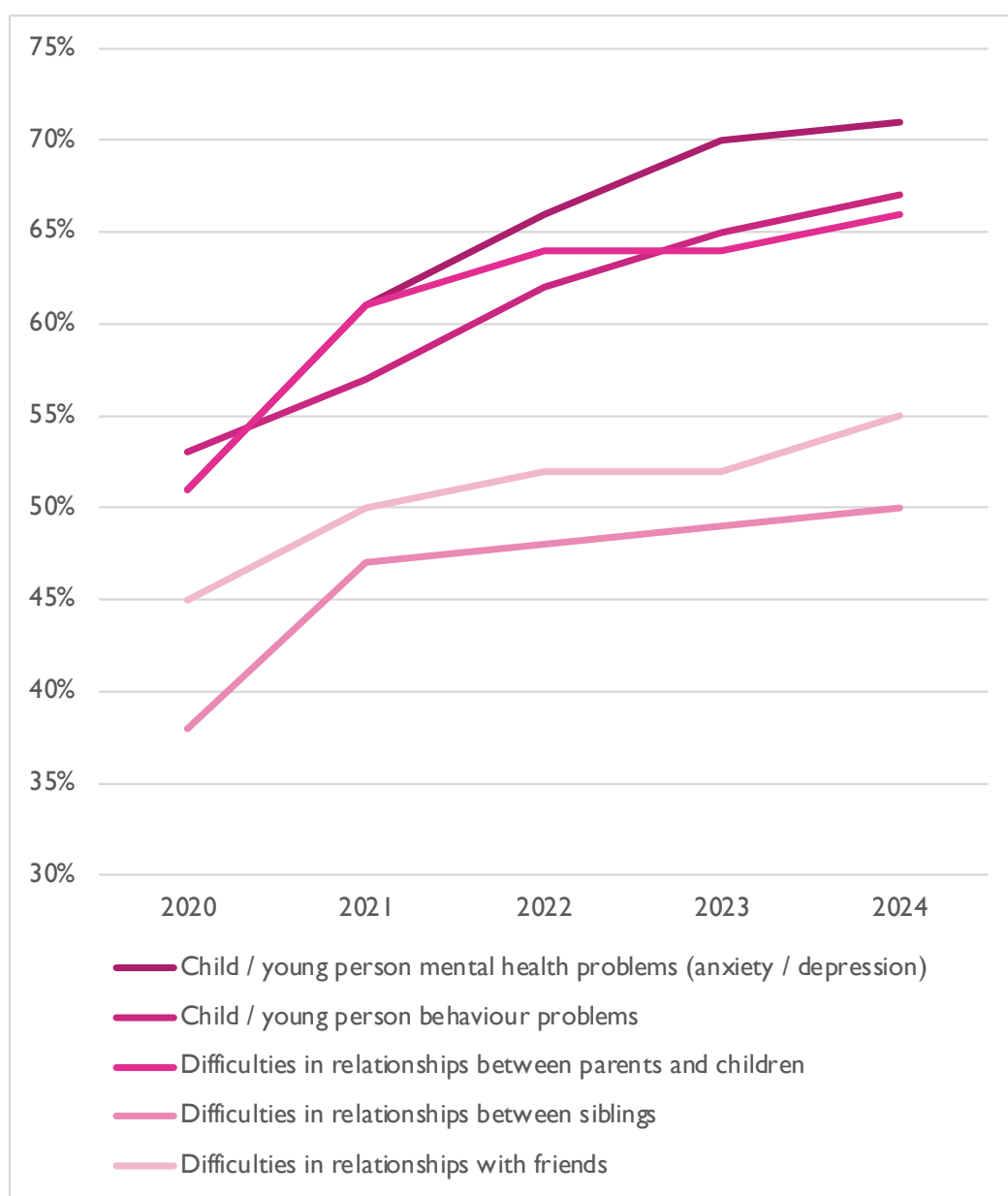
Section 3: Mental, emotional, and physical health

Our health is deeply interconnected with our lifestyle, environment, relationships, and the socio-economic circumstances we face. For children growing up in financially insecure households, all of these factors are at risk. In our survey, we measure wellbeing across multiple questions. Not only do we have clear numerate data evidencing declining mental, physical and emotional wellbeing for children and young people in 2024, but we also receive thousands of written responses detailing the toxic relationship between health and poverty in the households that frontline workers are supporting.

3.1 Mental health over time: 2020–2024

Chart 3 tracks a question we have asked annually for the past five years. In 2024, we saw a rise across all five key measures of wellbeing for the fifth year in a row. 71% of children and young people are reported as suffering mental health problems, now 20 percentage points higher than the same recorded measure in 2020. We have seen this rise year-on-year at a rapid pace. Families simply do not have the resources to cope, yet, as we set out in Section 5, they also don't have access to the services that are essential to overcome these crises.

Chart 3. Tracking social and emotional wellbeing over time



This pace is almost matched by the rise in behavioural problems, too, which now present in 67% of the children and young people our frontline workers are supporting. These behavioural problems are significant limiters in terms of engagement in education, self-regulation and family relationships. Where we might have expected to see these issues level off or even fall, in light of the increasing distance from the COVID-19 pandemic (where the first unprecedented rises are apparent in Chart 3), it has instead continued to steadily rise.

The impact is clear in the reported difficulties children face in their relationships with caregivers, siblings and peers. Two-thirds are experiencing relationship difficulties with their parent. In the last year alone, frontline workers have reported a 3-percentage point increase in friendship difficulties. Children and young people are becoming increasingly isolated by their experiences of financial hardship, a notion that was clear in our recent Growing Up in Poverty study. Children experience jealousy, anger, isolation, and resentment on seeing their peers access opportunities that are out of their reach. They simply cannot access the same spaces, because they do not have the money, transport, or wellbeing.

“Children become withdrawn and aggressive to their mothers, blaming her for not having things, new clothes etc that their friends at school have got, and being hungry, having just a dinner and no supper, snacks, fruit (West Midlands, England)”

“Tensions in the families have increased and I have seen relationship breakdowns due to the pressure. As a team, we have seen an increase in the police reports we are receiving, where they have been called out for reasons including parental arguments and young people going missing (Devon, England)”

“Children in households with a very low income struggle to fit in with other children in school due to self-esteem. They become withdrawn and isolated as they cannot afford to get the things that other children have such as IT devices and good clothes (London, England)”



3.2 Living with poor mental health

Support workers describe the vicious reality of poor wellbeing. Their qualitative responses told us that forms of self-neglect are common, and rising. This rise is attributed to several factors, but in particular, the absence of a stable and comfortable environment disrupts children's sense of normalcy and safety. Children and young people have little control over their circumstances, so they seek control in ways that are destructive; self-harm, self-neglect, eating disorders, suicidal ideation, and attempts on their own lives, are shockingly common.

“ It can all spiral as they can become demotivated as they don't have the items to be able to care for themselves and therefore start to neglect some of the things they can do (Warwickshire, England)

“ Every single case I work with either takes prescribed medication or medicates themselves through the likes of cannabis. They have all at one stage said that their mental health is directly affected by a lack of living standards and financial stability (South Ayrshire, Scotland)

“ The children I support are all suffering from several adverse childhood experiences and 90% of the children I support have mental health concerns. The other 10% are babies and this is not yet apparent (South Yorkshire, England)

Respondents told us that instances of anxiety disorders, depression, PTSD, and other serious mental illnesses are frequent, amongst even young children. These illnesses are caused by, and compounded by, hunger and poor sleep. Many respondents told us that overcrowding, low privacy, and uncomfortable furnishings (or lack of), leave children without a safe space to escape or recover at home. Schools and social settings might provide some respite, but these safe spaces are out of reach where young people do not feel well enough or are unable to afford to attend. In turn, this reduces children's access to crucial pastoral care, and the attention of adults with experience of safeguarding.

“ I have a child that truants whilst in school because of the abuse from her father, and domestic abuse...she has self-harmed, smoked drugs, used alcohol before school. [There is] not enough mental health support or waiting lists are long (Fife, Scotland)

“ [Children] are no longer mixing with their peers due to increasing anxiety and stress levels. Personal hygiene is impacted, and wellbeing is not a priority for children due to their mental health challenges (West Midlands, England)

“Lack of basic necessities such as a bed to sleep on, internet access, basic furniture, adequate clothing, and the inability to afford rent or food profoundly impacts the mental wellbeing of the children and young people I work with in the women’s refuge. These deprivations can lead to heightened stress, anxiety, and feelings of insecurity (London, England)”

Many respondents tell us that these mental health crises feel inescapable. Parents are described as having extremely diminished capacity to care for their children’s mental health, when their own is so depleted. They struggle to control behaviour and instil boundaries, when they have so little control over their situations. They also lack the means to reward good behaviour, provide celebrations, or take children on days out. Families are frequently described as being isolated, withdrawn and forced to spend all of their time inside, to the further detriment of their wellbeing.

“Parents are very stressed or despondent as a result of these struggles. This has a knock-on effect to the babies and toddlers who I work with. Often, they don’t go out of the home much (Cambridgeshire, England)”

“Financial difficulties mean the children are spending a lot of time at home with little stimulation or things to do outside of the family home. It can mean the children are eating unhealthy foods and do not have satisfactory living conditions, which can impact their health (Newport, Wales)”

“They are unable to access basic services due to costs on transport including health appointments, baby/toddler groups, including limiting social interactions between children of the same ages. [They experience] isolation and withdrawal from the wider community (Cornwall, England)”



Section 4: An education crisis

Each year, we explore the accessibility of education for children and young people. Every factor that has come before in this report can be seen as a potential barrier to education: access to basic goods and services, the home environment, mental illness, and social wellbeing are key examples. In 2024, support workers reported that:

- 66% of the children and young people they support were struggling to engage in their education.
- 63% were falling behind as a result of the high cost-of-living.

These have risen 3 percentage points apiece since 2023, indicating that education is becoming yet further out of reach. Support workers are absolutely clear that there is an education crisis for the most vulnerable children in the UK today. There is a very strong sentiment across many professional responses; how, or why, children should even expect to engage in their education when there are so many other fires that they are fighting.

4.1 Understanding the barriers

Chart 4. Exploring education and the impacts of financial hardship

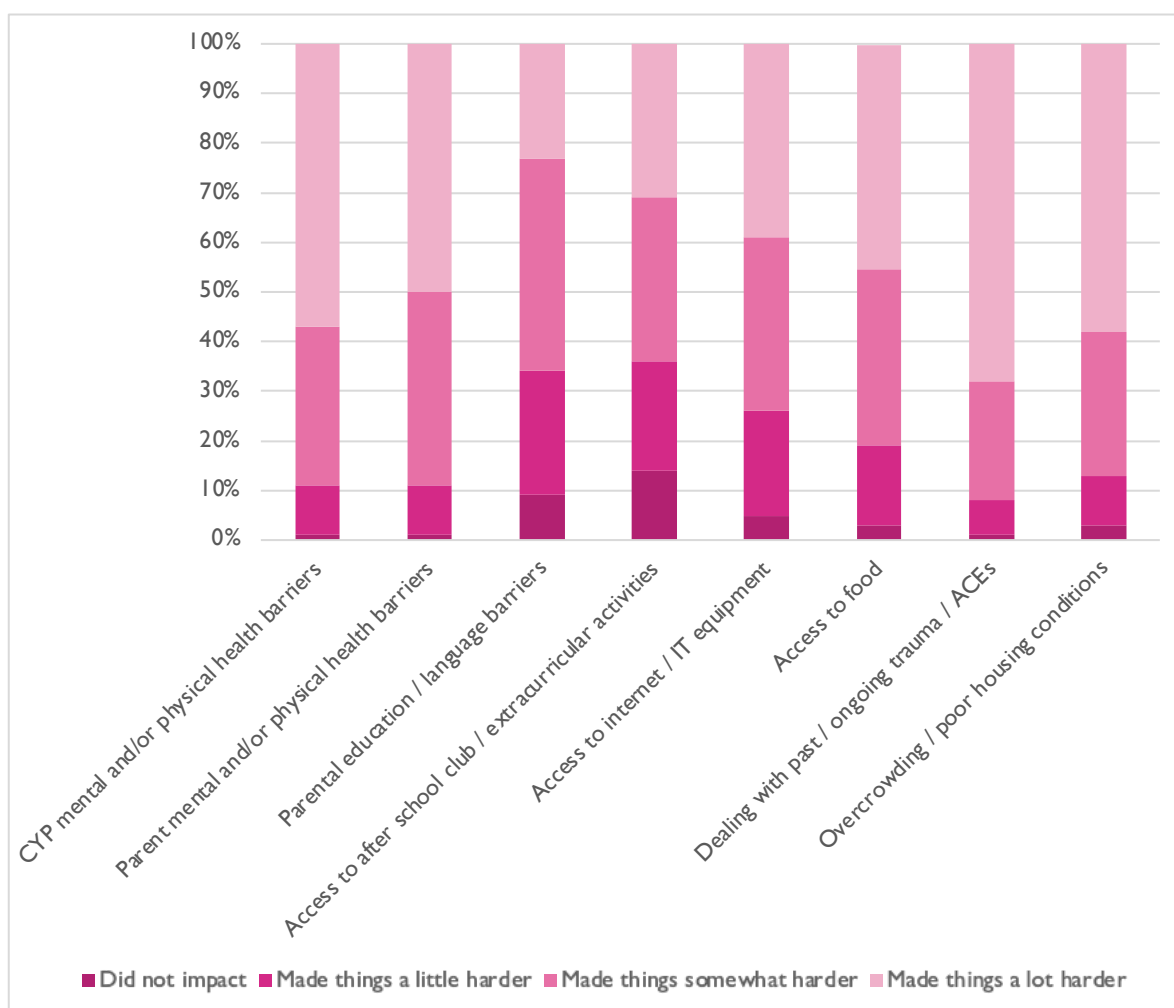


Chart 4 sets out the responses to a question posed to frontline workers, which asks them to rate a series of challenges associated with financial hardship, and the extent of their impact on engagement in education. 99% of all respondents reported that the mental and physical health issues of children and parents, and the trauma caused by ACEs, were making educational engagement harder. Following closely behind was access to food and poor housing conditions, rated as making things harder by 97% of respondents. This is both because of the physiological barriers and tangible barriers that these present.

“ Children feel that they may be in trouble for not having the correct school uniform, coming into school worrying...not having enough to eat at the beginning of the day, feeling hungry from the night before. Saying that they are cold in the winter months, due to lack of heating and not wanting to get out of their warm beds (London, England)

“ Some mornings [it's] for mum to decide if it is more important to put food on the table or to buy the bus pass needed for the young person to go to school (Merseyside, England)

“ Children who have not slept well due to being cold from not having enough to pay for gas, or due to overcrowding, as well as children who come to school hungry because they do not have enough food in the house, struggle through the school day (Kent, England)

It is important to analyse the extent of these challenges and their relationship with educational engagement. Dealing with trauma from ACEs was the highest rated barrier to education, with 68% of respondents indicating that it is making education **a lot** harder. The 57% who also rated children's poor mental and physical health as making education **a lot** harder referenced the strong interaction between trauma, low wellbeing, and diminished capacity to thrive. This was apparent in an overwhelming number of qualitative responses.

“ The young people spend more mind space worrying about their basic needs and preventing that mind space being utilised for education (Glasgow, Scotland)

“ Young people do not care about their education, and they have little aspiration in life. It is difficult to get young people involved in clubs or sports which may help give them a focus and something they can achieve at. Living in poverty directly effects how well they achieve in life (Cornwall, England)

“ Many children are aware that their parents are struggling and it affects their concentration in school and leads to poor attainment and attendance (Bedfordshire, England)

14% of respondents shared that access to extracurricular provision made no difference to children's engagement in education. However, this is in conflict with the findings of the GUIP report, where parents themselves felt that access to afterschool or extracurricular provision would offer opportunities to socialise, learn new skills and provide respite for parents themselves to work. It is interesting to compare this finding against the 58% of respondents who reported that overcrowding and poor housing conditions were making education 'a lot' harder, rising to 87% of respondents when including those that rated it as making education 'somewhat' harder. Children are clearly struggling to learn in homes that are not equipped or set up for learning, which is where additional provision from schools may be instrumental.

When we look at the responses to the same question in 2023, we find two major changes:

- A 9-percentage point rise in the most severe rating for living with poor housing conditions/overcrowding and dealing with the ongoing impacts of ACEs. This is certainly reflective of the rising severity of ACEs and increasingly appalling standards of living outlined across this report.
- A 5 and 4-percentage point rise respectively in the most severe rating for child and parent health barriers as a barrier to education. This reflects our assertions about a building health crisis and the impacts that are spreading into all aspects of children's lived experience due to inadequate intervention.

When we asked respondents to describe how these barriers present themselves, we received hundreds of responses. The excessive worry and anxiety that children experience contributes to their declining mental health and poor capacity to engage in their learning, compounding the lack of items and resources they need to access their education. Aside from mental illness, the second most common theme amongst responses was the extreme bullying that children are facing because of financial hardship. They are treated poorly by their peers because of their differences, and this profoundly influences their sense of worth and self-esteem. This discourages attendance and increases their distress. Tough behavioural policies can also compound the singling out of poor and vulnerable children, who face punishment for not being able to meet uniform and homework expectations, even where this is because of their circumstances and not a lack of effort or desire.

“ [Poverty] has increased their isolation, badly affected their sense of self-worth, fuelled depression and anxiety, eaten away at their confidence, they don't feel they fit in with their peers, feel they have nothing to talk about (Edinburgh, Scotland)

“ They feel they are different from their peers...at risk of bullying for not having the latest equipment/clothes. Feeling cold and hungry, unable to concentrate at school or overly tired, school avoidance. Personal hygiene can be affected [which is a] risk factor for bullying (Somerset, England)

“ It affects their education as a lot of them do not have access to internet or computers. They cannot afford to go on school trips and they look unkempt compared to their peers. This has a negative impact on their self-esteem and self-worth (Essex, England)

At the same time, their diminished capacity to learn – particularly due to lacking the necessary technology to undertake learning tasks and homework – leads to further negative internal and external perceptions of their abilities. Young people experience low motivation to try, as they have little chance of achieving their potential. Frontline workers describe young people with next to no hope, and express frustration at a system that seems rigged to fail to allow children to thrive.

“The children are often aware of their differences to other children and see themselves as less worthy or that things are unjust this is often portrayed in anger which is then labelled as bad behaviour which reaffirms their low self-worth (West Midlands, England)”

“Not being able to have the basic needs as friends is devastating, the child is made to feel different and asks why me? It knocks their confidence, encourages crime, school attendance, violence and aggression and missing from home (Greater Manchester, England)”

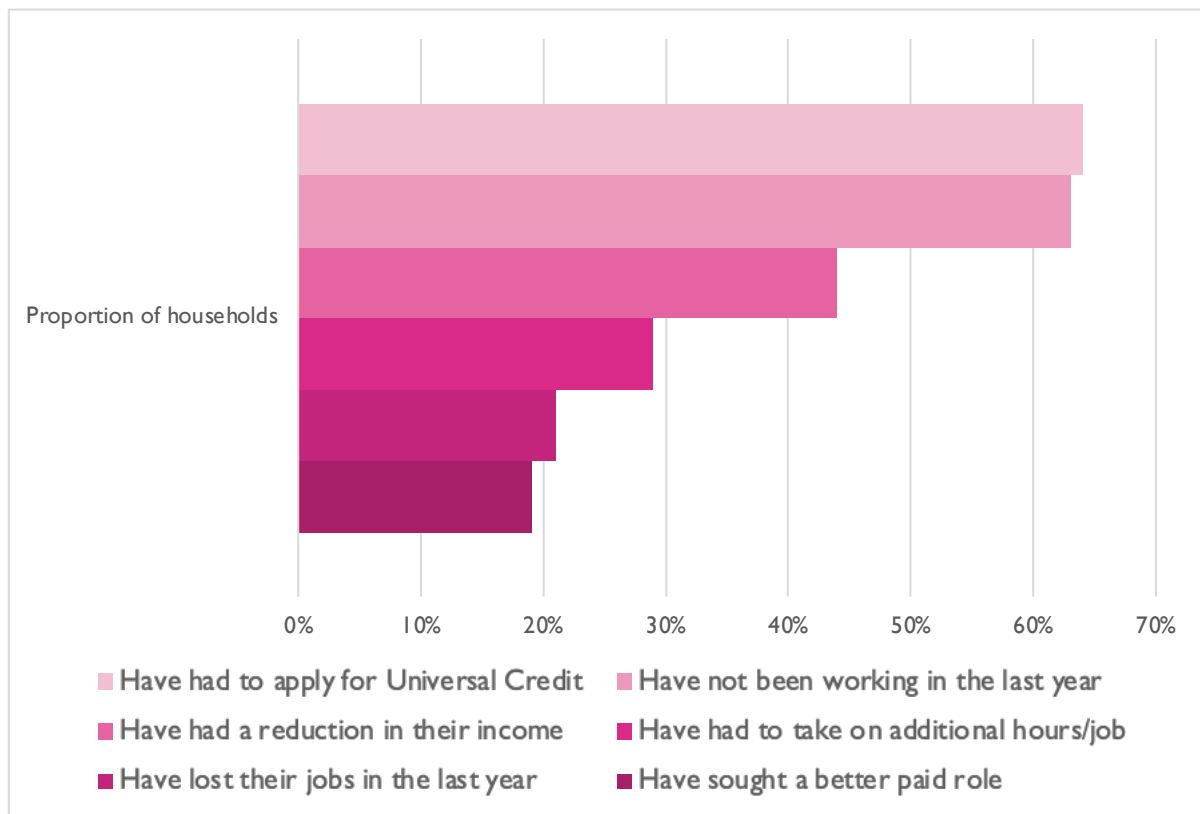
“They are often estranged, experience disengagement for periods of time, are unable to get up in a morning, and feel a lack of self-worth, ability to complete tasks (West Yorkshire, England)”

4.2 From education to work

Financial hardship doesn't only impact education. It also creates barriers to work and employment. This affects the working behaviours, demands and stresses of parents and carers. It also impacts young people taking on work to support their families, which is particularly challenging for estranged young people running their own household independently. For this reason, the term 'households' is used to refer collectively to parents, carers and young people in this section, to capture all working individuals in the homes that our respondents support.

A very high proportion of households are reported to have had to apply for Universal Credit in the last year (64%), closely mirrored by the proportion who have been unemployed in the same time period (63%). Respondents attributed this to the very severe impacts of poor health, trauma, and abuse in the home, leading to families having the dual impact of low to no income, and high needs. They also disclosed that 44% of households have had a reduction in their income. The interaction between reduced spending power (due to the cost-of-living crisis) coupled with real-term reductions in income is having catastrophic effects on the cashflow of impoverished households.





29% of households were also reported as needing to take on more hours, or an additional job. However, this was seen as a negative influence in the home, as it further reduced opportunities to build relationships and support between parent and child. It also adds stress and overwork in homes where tensions are high, and wellbeing is poor. Furthermore, a common response indicated that even in households with a combination of earned income and Universal Credit, there still is not enough money to cover essential costs. The gap between earnings and benefits, and the cost of living, is simply too wide for households on low incomes.

“ [Single parent] is struggling...her teenage son has taken on a part-time job so his wages act as his pocket money. I think this highlights that even those who are in employment are struggling with the rising costs of everything (Glasgow, Scotland)

“ Parents tend to take on more piecework or odd jobs to cope with rising prices, which ultimately results in less time spent with their families and children (London, England)

“ Parents will be working more to try and make enough money to feed the family, this leaves kids alone more often and can lead to them being neglected. I have 16-year-old girls who aren't going to school because they are staying at home to look after younger siblings and the home because they know that mum has to work (Norfolk, England)

For young people, these factors are leading to difficult choices about continuing with their education. Some have no option but to work full-time to support themselves or their families. Respondents offered many examples of premature termination of education, because the child or young person could not afford to attend their setting at the expense of hours they needed to give to employment. Sadly, there were also allusions to lost potential, where students who might have otherwise enjoyed a longer educational career had dropped out or failed, because of lack of opportunity and ability to thrive.

“ My 16+ homeless sometimes have to choose between education and part time jobs in order to buy food or pay bills/rent and they worry about their education or their future and this leads to increased poor mental health (Cornwall, England)

“ A lot of our young people are living in squalor and cannot afford basic things. We are having to do food bank referrals weekly. This means they are often dropping out of college as they have bigger things to worry about. This is affecting their mental health and affecting their attendance even more (North Yorkshire, England)

“ Our client group have already poor mental health due to childhood trauma and so rely on benefits and are in then expected to manage on £66...they are furthest removed from the job market and so their feeling of helplessness, being judged and removed from society is huge (Falkirk, Scotland)



66 Sometimes we feel like we are working with children you would recognise in a Victorian novel, they are hungry and live in poor conditions and are so concerned with living day-to-day that they don't have the space to engage in education. They are lured into criminal and sexual activity, and I don't think people in the wider population living in a fairly affluent part of Kent have any idea that they even exist (Kent, England)

66 Family of a young person unable to replace their child's school shoes which are already hurting their feet. Young person was told they will need to wait and see what money is left after they receive their benefit to determine if they will be able to get him new shoes. No child should be in discomfort ever (South Lanarkshire, Scotland)

66 I have worked with many families that have not been able to afford heat and lighting and have had to sit with blankets over them, and in the dark, and not being able to wash themselves or clothes, so this in turn affects their mental health, self-esteem and confidence (Greater Manchester, England)

66 A family of 6 living in a 2-bed flat that is riddled with mould and damp, no access to a washing machine, in receipt of benefits and food parcels from us. Children struggling as living in one bedroom and lounge converted to bedroom too. Behavioural issues in children due to lack of privacy and poor health (West Midlands, England)

66 A thirteen-year-old child sleeping on a sofa for the last two months. A local secondary school having to set up a 'grab and go' service for young people hungry and unable to purchase food (County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland)

66 Children sleeping on soiled mattresses on the floor, no bedding and soiled quilts/pillows, how does this feel like home for these children? (Staffordshire, England)

66 One family were living in hotel rooms, with no means to cook proper meals. 1 parent and 3 siblings all in the same room impacts on the mental health of all of them (Kent, England)

Section 5: Support Systems

We know firsthand from frontline workers just how challenging their roles are. We already know from the applications we receive, the complexities that come with grant delivery, and hearing from support workers with immensely complex, overwhelming caseloads. There is a deep and enduring desire on the frontline to support and uplift households living through such low living standards. However, there are many barriers preventing this from happening, and service availability is reportedly worse in 2024 than in any single year we have previously measured.

In Table 5, respondents indicate the proportion of the families they support that need particular services. The most commonly required services are not from one particular sector: the highest needs for support range across mental health (70%), housing (63%), and finances (63%). The need for support to buy food, utilities and furniture spans 58-59% of families, too. These are extremely high proportions and have changed only marginally since 2023. This is very much in line with the needs and difficulties we have described across this report.

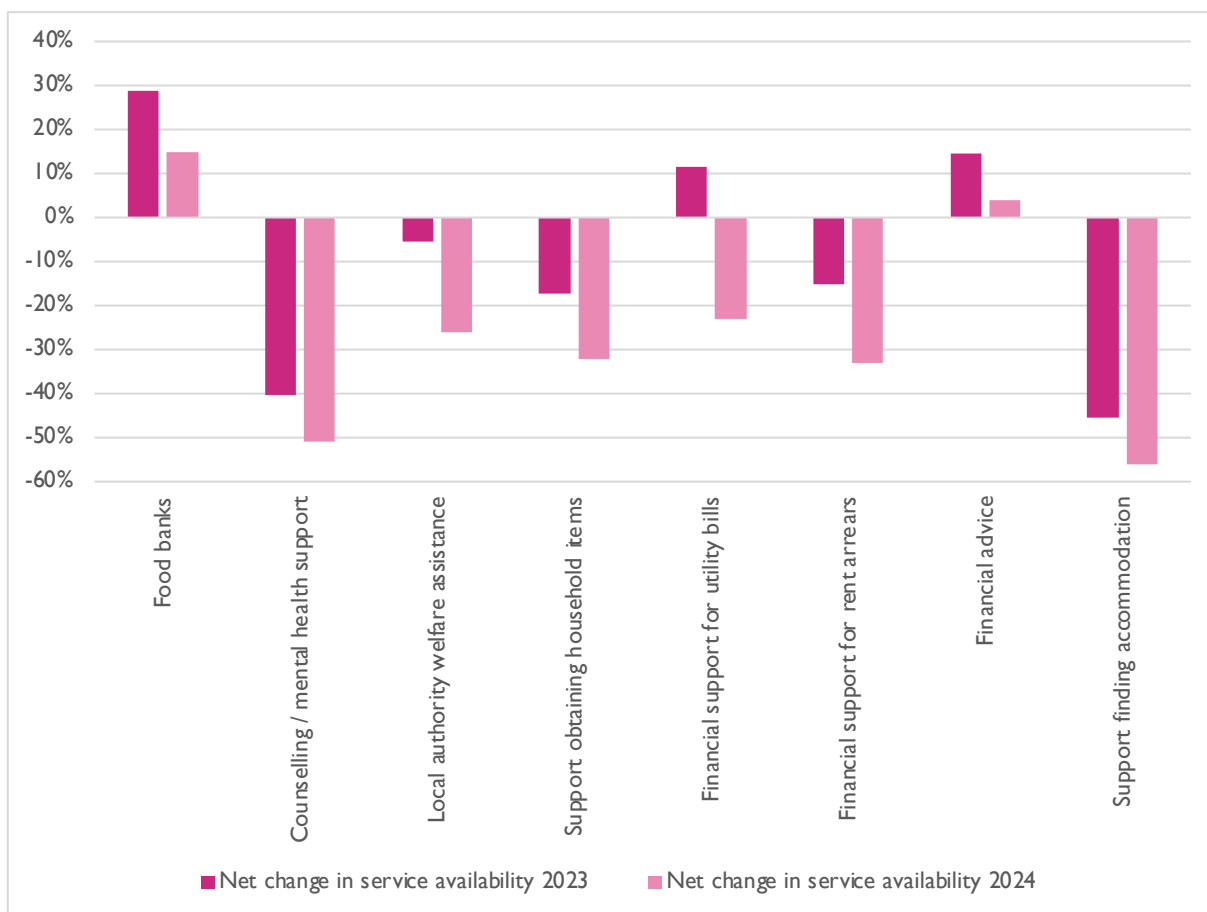
Chart 4. Exploring education and the impacts of financial hardship

Type of service	% of families requiring support	Net change in service availability in 2024
Food banks	58%	+15%
Counselling / therapy / other mental health support	70%	-51%
Local authority welfare assistance	62%	-26%
Support obtaining household items (e.g. white goods, furniture)	58%	-32%
Financial support for utility bills	59%	-23%
Financial support for rent arrears	49%	-33%
Financial advice	63%	+4%
Support finding accommodation	63%	-56%

However, there have been significant drops in service availability. Respondents reported a 51% net decline in mental health support, only topped by the 56% net fall in support finding accommodation. Most other services had a net drop of between 25-35%. In order to highlight the severity of these falls, we compared the net change in service availability reported in 2023 and 2024, the results of which are modelled in Chart 5. In every instance, the availability had declined (or not increased) at a rate worse than the previous year.



Chart 4. Exploring education and the impacts of financial hardship



Notable drops are apparent in the provision of support for utility bills (45 percentage points lower than 2023) and local welfare assistance schemes (20 percentage points lower than 2023) when comparing year-on-year. This is not just about articulating the depth of need – which is certainly apparent when comparing the services that families need most and the largest drops in availability. The point is to **illuminate the gap that is growing wider every year between need and provision.**

Positive increases in availability were seen in both years for food banks, though smaller in proportion in 2024. Increases in food bank provision should not necessarily be seen as a positive; they respond to need, and fill gaps where income and state benefits are not sufficient. The only other service with a reported increase in availability in 2024 is financial advice. Yet, advice does not serve as a replacement for tangible support. While financial advice certainly has value, it is challenging to educate or advise families on financial support if the actual services delivering financial support are in decline.

It should be considered that this year’s cohort of respondents had slightly higher representation from social services. This may have had some influence in terms of the changes in perceived availability of support services, but this slight change in representation is not so large as to account completely for the significant shifts seen here.

Finally, we asked frontline workers to rate which service they felt was of most value to families. This helps identify which single issue they feel is most pressing for children living in households in financial hardship today. In 2024, we saw yet again that mental health support was considered the most crucial, as with the same question in 2022 and 2023. Financial support for rent and utility bills saw a proportional decline since last year but remained high at 19% of respondents. The open-text responses in the ‘other’ text box largely centred on feedback that one service could not be picked over another because there were so many conflicting needs, and that a multi-sector approach was absolutely necessary.

Table 6. Exploring the most crucial support

Most crucial support needed going forward	2022	2023	2024
Counselling / therapy / other mental health support	29%	23%	27%
Additional educational support	3%	2%	3%
Support finding accommodation	9%	12%	16%
Financial support for rent and / or utility bills	28%	28%	19%
Food banks	8%	12%	11%
Support obtaining household items	3%	5%	6%
Other	20%	18%	18%

5.1 Insufficiency and inefficiency

Over 1,000 frontline workers contributed to the findings of this report. They provide a robust narrative of the extreme challenges that families in the UK are enduring. They also have a powerful understanding of the role of their own services, and others across the frontline, in overcoming these challenges. Yet, they speak overwhelmingly of their own internal pressures, and the almost complete breakdown of support services for families in poverty, with a mixture of anger, frustration and embarrassment. It is clear that services are not only insufficient, but inefficient too; funding is poorly applied, failing to meet need yet not delivering value either.

One aspect of support that has become increasingly invaluable, is that of charities and the voluntary sector. Grants in particular are viewed as a lifeline for many, providing items and services that are not funded by state provision. However, grant providers are reported as overwhelmed and struggling to keep up with demand. Food banks are viewed similarly; though they have increased in number, they struggle to keep pace with the frequency with which households rely on them to keep entire families fed. Some workers express exasperation that their entire capacity is spent on ensuring households' most basic physiological needs are met, where these needs should be met by government support.

“

I have applied for a multitude of grants this year and had 99% turned down. This has left families struggling and relying on food banks and charity (Tyne and Wear, England)

“

I frequently send families to food banks etc. despite them receiving their full benefit entitlements, and I don't know what we'd do without local baby banks and grants available through organisations such as your own (London, England)

“

Support services are crumbling, there is no funding, no resources, everything takes so long to implement, and families fall further into crisis, we have a mental health epidemic and children are suffering as a result (East Sussex, England)

Many frontline workers feel that their service has been unable to deliver its primary purpose, which triggers a growing cycle of poverty and crisis. Because families are no longer being supported after experiences such as abuse and the lived experience of poverty, the root cause of mental health crises are no longer being addressed. This leaves parents with continuing diminished capacity to return to work or support their children. Likewise, children are not receiving crucial support for these challenges

in their foundational years, which eats into their ability to get an education and fulfil their hopes and ambitions for the future.

“ We are constantly referring to foodbanks and a shift in our work over the last couple of years has been to respond to acute family stress, caused by poverty (Nottinghamshire, England)

“ I have become a crisis worker, rather than someone who provides social integration support. I am constantly dealing with huge amounts of fuel debt, UC randomly being cut off, arguing with food banks. I simply don't have time for [my old role] anymore (Lancashire, England)

“ We are unable to complete our domestic abuse work as we are overwhelmed with requests for foodbanks, gas, electric...some young people/children will not receive support around their experiences of abuse as we are having to meet their basic needs beforehand (Midlothian, Scotland)

Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of respondents told us that a serious lack of funding was to blame. They provided examples of their own services being so underfunded that they lacked the necessary staff to cover the caseloads, or the resources to remotely address their clients' varied needs. Funding was seen as particularly diminished in the mental health support sector, with the result that waiting lists are years-long, and provision of sessions falls short. Several respondents acknowledged the safeguarding concerns that they witness, that they feel powerless to prevent or support.

“ We have seen increasing safeguarding concerns, but a lack of ability of services to respond effectively. Early Help and Intervention seems not to exist anymore. Young people are experiencing greater risks of harm and direct harm as a result of this (Powys, Wales)

“ We see young people and children who would benefit from therapeutic/targeted interventions but services not being designed or purposeful for their needs...not detailed enough to start exploring the cause and impact (North Yorkshire, England)

“ There are a high proportion of young people who have been impacted by lack of finances for food, warmth and basic essentials in life however, CAMHS are completely overwhelmed, and resources are not available when needed to help provide much needed support (Fife, Scotland)

Sadly, we know that frontline workers are feeling hopeless; for themselves, and for the families they support. Many no longer see their own role as making a necessary difference to families living in poverty and experiencing crisis, not least without more funding, manageable caseloads and stronger cross-sector working. Furthermore, entire aspects of administrative infrastructure, particularly the NHS and housing, are seen as needing a complete overhaul to remotely meet demand.

“**There is a sense of hopelessness. As a social worker I often feel that there’s nothing that I could do that would make the necessary difference to this (Somerset, England)**”

“**The current state of child poverty these days has been the worst that I have ever known it in my 20+ years working in this role. Parents are finding it increasingly difficult to afford food, never mind clothing their children and afford to keep them warm (Derbyshire, England)**”

“**In the 43 years I have worked in this service I have never experienced the level of child poverty we are seeing today in one of the so-called richest countries in the world. And for some children and young people, they can see no way out of this trap (West Yorkshire, England)**”

“**The situation is the worst I have seen it, I have been a qualified social worker for 15 years and my experiences of child poverty is the worst it has ever been. The majority of children who I have come into contact with do not have their basic needs met (Cumbria, England)**”



66
Young girl bleeding through her 1 school uniform as no sanitary products, no washing machine to wash the uniform, missed 2 weeks of school because of this (Greater Manchester, England)

66
I am working with a family of 7. Two of the school age boys are similar in size, they have to share trainers as parents cannot afford to get them both a pair (Hampshire, England)

66
[Mum] could not afford to open windows during the winter as she had used her UC payments towards electricity and gas bills. Mould developed and kept returning. The child had a pre-existing health issue which was made worse by breathing in mould particles. He was admitted to A&E (Cardiff, Wales)

66
The 16-year-old supported accommodation resident texted me saying he was hungry. Asked him to come over to the office where I shared some milk, cereals and can of soup that we stored in staff cupboard and then made a referral to food bank for him (Kent, England)

66
I know a 19-year-old care leaver...he eats noodles and the cheapest of foods, rarely can afford fruit or fresh vegetables. His clothes are old, shoes too small as he squeezes into the largest child size to save money. Never has a warm coat as they are expensive to buy. He is alone, lonely and afraid a lot of the time. He is extremely thin, no flesh on him at all (West Midlands, England)

66
Child living with his Mum in temporary accommodation moved every few days, 3 buses to school and 3 back. No cooking facilities in hotel room, can't play outdoors, can't wash clothes. He shares a bed with his Mum (Lancashire, England)

66
A teen attended school but not in the right uniform. He would rather be at school than with his parents who argued all day. He received behaviour points which led to suspension from school. He became despondent... he got involved in county lines. He is now working with youth justice (Flintshire, Wales)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report, the sixth of its kind, captures the complex interactions between multiple factors in children's homes in 2024. Their common link is financial hardship, and the common conclusion is the appalling challenges that households in poverty are facing. **58%** of all families that our frontline respondents work with can be said to be in **destitution**. That is 22 percentage points higher than the same measure in 2021.

The wider context is crucial: families cannot afford the food or utilities they need. They can barely afford their rent. They don't have clean clothes, or enough clothes. Their houses are poorly furnished and unsuitable for play, learning or relaxing. Families live with unendurable stress and misery. It is hardly surprising that the rates of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in these homes are steadily rising, nor that their severity is growing at an even greater pace.

One of the clearest findings of this report is that support service availability has dropped considerably since last year. This means that the multiple, interacting issues examined throughout are occurring at a time where corresponding support is not just low, but dropping. In the meantime, children and young people are facing the long-term consequences of inadequate intervention. Respondents told us, in droves, how many are dropping out or barely accessing their education because of mental illness, unfurnished homes, poor relationships, and lacking learning devices. Students are tired, hungry, dirty, cold and isolated.

We must not forget, too, that our recent Growing Up in Poverty report found that parents and carers reported their own rate of destitution at 81%. It may be that there is a disconnect even between the frontline workers and the families living in these circumstances, which has concerning repercussions for the rest of the findings in this report. Knowing that things are possibly worse than we report here is concerning. The findings are already distressing enough. We wish to express our thanks and appreciation to every support worker who took the time to complete the survey.

As a result of these findings, Buttle UK has the following calls to action:

- We stand behind the Child Poverty Strategy⁸ due to be published in Spring 2025. We support the commitment to reducing essential costs, particularly those acting as barriers to education, as well commitments to providing better local support, particularly focusing on children's early years, with work on improving access and the quality of necessary services. We support the '8 Tests' proposed by the End Child Poverty Coalition⁹ to hold this strategy to account when it is published.
- We continue to stand with End Child Poverty's call for the lifting of the two-child limit in their All Kids Count Campaign. The two-child limit significantly reduces household income and wellbeing. A quarter of a million children would be lifted out of poverty if it was scrapped¹⁰. We stand by this call, and have done since it was announced in 2023, because we know the two-child limit is a negative factor in many of the conclusions made in this report.

⁸ [GOV.UK | Child Poverty Strategy](#)

⁹ [End Child Poverty | 8 Tests](#)

¹⁰ [Child Poverty Action Group | All Kids Count Campaign](#)

- The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust are continuing to advocate for an uplift in Universal Credit payments, which they demonstrate are not adequate to cover the basic cost of living for low-income households. We stand behind their Guarantee our Essentials campaign, which is proposing an independent process to regularly determine an ‘essentials guarantee level’¹¹.
- We stand with the Crushed by a Million Pressures campaign being led by Young Minds¹², which calls on the government to stand on their election promises to support and improve the mental health crisis we are seeing for children and young people. The campaign calls for the provision of early support hubs with an open-access approach to mental health support. It also calls on the government to tackle poverty and discrimination, which they argue acts as a root cause of youth mental health crises, and are campaigning for the involvement of young people more directly in policies surrounding mental health.



¹¹ [Joseph Rowntree Foundation | Essentials Guarantee](#)

¹² [Young Minds | Crushed by a Million Pressures](#)



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