



What it is really like for children growing up in poverty in the UK in 2019 – Part 1

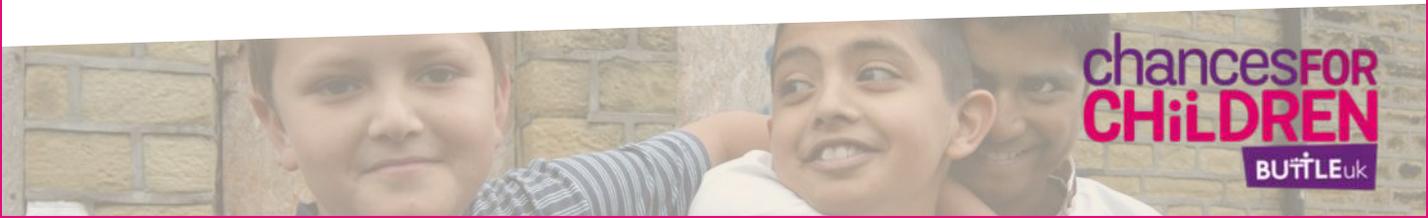
A **Buttle UK** survey of over **1,200** child support workers

Executive Summary

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

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

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



We had over 1,200 responses, making this an extremely comprehensive survey. Results have highlighted:

- Just how often children are having to survive without the basics:
 - 60% of support workers are often (i.e. more than once a week) seeing families who are unable to afford the basics (food, household items, fuel).
 - 50% of support workers are often seeing children fed breakfast and/or dinner at school because families cannot afford to feed them themselves.
 - 48% of support workers are seeing families unable to afford the costs of children's clothes and shoes.
- Particular concerns with the summer holidays coming up:
 - 65% are seeing families unable to afford / have no access to holiday activities.
 - 53% are seeing families unable to afford food and childcare during the holidays.
- Support workers report that 54% of families being supported are living in destitution, and nearly three quarters of these support workers (74%) have seen an increase in the number in the last year.
- 49% of support workers see families who are working but are not earning enough to make ends meet more than once a week, and 21% of workers see this problem on a daily basis.
- 18% of support workers have seen an increase in the number of families needing financial support when at least two people in the household are working, and 39% have seen an increase where one person in the family is working.
- Nearly 100% said they saw families experience issues of rising debt, delays due to Universal Credit and cuts to welfare services to some extent, but 30% reported they see families experiencing all these problems on a daily basis.
- 85% of support workers see families being affected by violent crime, and 37% are seeing this more than once a week.



Against the backdrop of these challenges, the picture in terms of available support is mixed:

- The only areas where there is substantive growth is in the availability of support is through foodbanks; 49% of support workers reported an increase in the availability of food banks.
- Less than 15% reported an increase in availability of furniture recycling schemes, help with utility bills, help with rent arrears, local authority welfare assistance schemes, and free/affordable activities for children.
- 20%-25% reported an increase in furniture recycling schemes and the number of charities providing grants for household items.

However:

- Over 40% reported a decrease in availability of support through local authority welfare assistance schemes, grant-giving charities and free/affordable activities for children
- 20%-33% reported a decrease in furniture recycling schemes, school uniform payment support, help with utility bills and with rent arrears.



Methodology

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

We asked a range of closed questions (generally on a scale from never to very often [daily], or on a scale indicating the percentage of families they work with experiencing certain issues [i.e. 0-24%, rarely; 25-49%, sometimes; 50-74%, often; 75-100%, very often]) to assess how often support workers see issues with families being able to afford essentials, the number of families they see living in destitution and changes in the number of families needing financial support that they have seen over the last year. We also asked about levels of violent crime. We asked how these struggles affect the children and young people living in poverty that they work with, and what other experiences children in poverty have to face. We also provided a number of opportunities for open-ended responses, allowing support workers to go into detail about the difficulties children face as a result of poverty, the impact of poverty on children, and the struggles children face. A selection of quotes from these responses are included in the report; however, these are not attributed to the particular respondents as was agreed as part of the terms of completing the questionnaire.

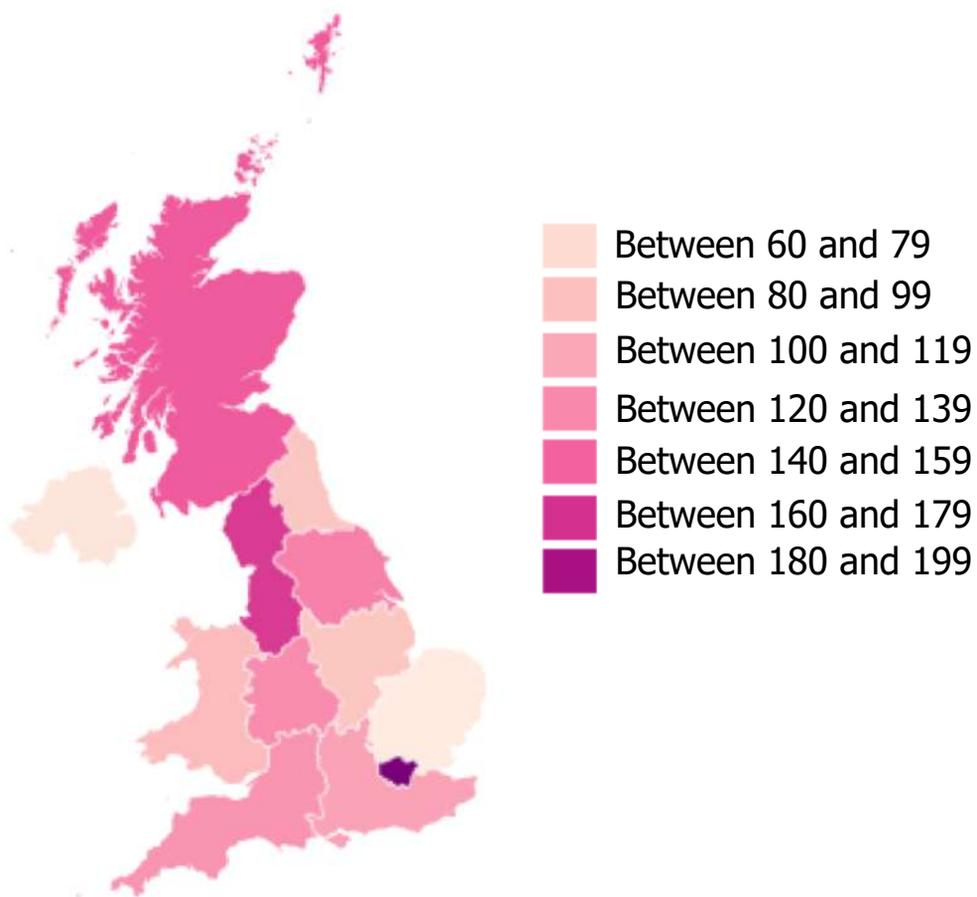
The Respondents

We had a high response rate to this survey, with 1,290 individuals that work with children and young people across the UK completing the questionnaire in total. We obtained results from people working with vulnerable children and young people in poverty across all regions in the UK, from 616 organisations. These organisations include local authorities / councils, charities, housing associations, Citizen's Advice, local healthcare trust partnerships, primary and secondary schools and children's centres. All respondents work directly with children and young people in poverty in roles such as family support workers, community project workers, social workers, health visitors, school careers advisors, probation officers, advocacy/advisors, youth workers, community nurses, tutors and head teachers. The map below shows where across the UK the individual responses came from, and the table shows the distribution of organisations that we received responses from.



Region	Organisations
East Midlands	33
East of England	30
London	97
North East	27
north west	70
Northern Ireland	31
Scotland	71
South East England	48
South West England	60
Wales	40
West Midlands	48
Yorkshire and The Humber	61
Grand Total	616

The map below shows the distribution of responses across the UK:



The vulnerability and experiences of children in poverty

To provide some context on the difficulties that the children that support workers surveyed come into contact with, we asked them how often they support children exposed to Adverse Childhood Experiences.

The term Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) refers to a number of traumatic or stressful experiences that can increase the risk of multiple negative outcomes in the future. These traumatic experiences include child sexual, physical and emotional abuse, physical and emotional neglect, parental separation, drug or alcohol abuse in the household, parent incarceration, and domestic violence. ACEs have widely been shown to impact on a range of outcomes into adulthood. Research shows that individuals who experience four or more ACEs are at greater risk for physical health problems (e.g. cardiovascular disease, obesity and type II diabetes), mental health problems (depression, suicidality and anxiety), health harming behaviours such as early sexual activity, drug and alcohol misuse, and smoking, criminality and violence perpetration and victimisation.^{1,2,3}



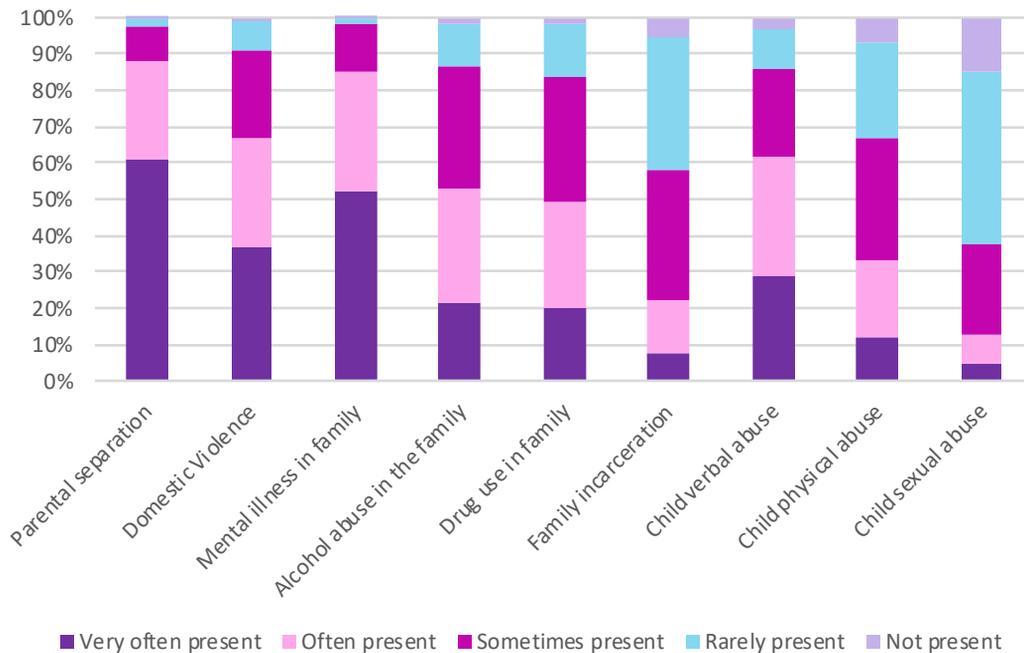
1. Hughes, K., Bellis, M. A., Hardcastle, K. A., Sethi, D., Butchart, A., Mikton, C., ... & Dunne, M. P. (2017). The effect of multiple adverse childhood experiences on health: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *The Lancet Public Health*, 2(8), e356-e366.

2. [Public Health Wales \(2016\) Adverse Childhood Experiences in Wales \[multiple reports\]](#)

3. UCL Institute of Health Equity (2015) The impact of adverse experiences in the home on the health of children and young people, and inequalities in prevalence and effects.



Presence of ACEs



We asked respondents in what percentage of families they see the above ACEs (i.e., never; rarely, in less than 25% of families; sometimes, in 25-49% of families; often, in 50-74% of families, and; very often, in 75% or more families). The graph above provides an overview of the range of ACEs our respondents witness through their work.

- Over half of respondents reported that parental separation, domestic violence, family mental illness, family drug use and verbal abuse are often present in the families they work with (i.e. in 50% or more of cases). This reflects the information Buttle UK sees in applications for grants on a daily basis; these factors are the most common adverse experiences among the children we support.
- Parental separation was most commonly reported as being present in more than 75% of families (61% of responses), followed by mental illness of a family member (52% of responses) and domestic violence (49% of responses).
- The ACEs that were most often reported as not being present for the children they work with were child sexual abuse, child physical abuse and parent incarceration (not present in any families for 15%, 7% and 6% of support workers, respectively). All other issues were only absent in families for <1% to 3% of respondents.



The difficulties that children in poverty face

We asked support workers how often they see families struggling to afford: the basics (e.g. food, household items, fuel); children's clothes and shoes; the costs of cleaning children's clothes and bedding and the costs of internet access.

We also asked how often support workers see children needing new clothes and shoes, and how often they see schools having to wash children's clothes and provide breakfast or dinner for the child.

Being unable to afford the essentials

As can be seen in the graph below, support workers see these struggles present among children in poverty far more often than they do not. As well as all of these factors, support workers commonly reported that parents are also unable to afford basic health essentials, such as medication and trips to medical appointments. The table below shows the percentage of support workers that reported either: never seeing these problems, sometimes seeing these problems (less than once a week), and often seeing these problems (once a week or more).



- More often than not, support workers are seeing that families cannot afford the basics. Less than 1% of those surveyed said they never witness this struggle.
- 60% often see families unable to afford the basics; 27% are seeing families in this situation on a daily basis, and 33% once a week or more.
- 50% of workers often witness children having to be fed breakfast and/or dinner at school because families cannot afford to feed their child themselves; 20% see families in this situation on a daily basis.



- 43% of support workers are often seeing parents who are unable to afford children's clothing and shoes; 19% see this on a daily basis, and 24% once a week or more.
- 37% of support workers see parents being unable to afford the costs of cleaning children's clothes or bedding; 13% see it on a daily basis, and 24% once a week or more.
- 25% see families where the children are without an appropriate bed of their own; 8% on a daily basis, and 17% once a week or more.
- 33% of workers often see families unable to access the internet; 14% on a daily basis and 19% once a week or more.



"[There are] worries over neglect/presentation [of children at school] which is because families are struggling to maintain the costs associated with this due to not having basic essential items [washing materials]. There has been a rise in number of children sleeping on a mattress on the floor. Children are appearing hungry at school so being given additional food at breakfast/lunchtime."

"Families are unable to provide the basic needs like heat, food, bedding. In some families the child sleeps on a mattress on the floor with no sheets."

"The cost of clothing/shoes for the changing seasons is a difficulty, especially for those families affected by the cap with three or more children."

"Mothers go without food so their children can eat. This then impacts on the parenting capacity and mental health."

"[Children are] limited to having a bath once a week as families can't afford to heat the water...[they are] more likely to have hygiene problems. They may be limited on how often they are able to run the washing machine...I have seen an increase in scabies as sheets etc. aren't washed so often."

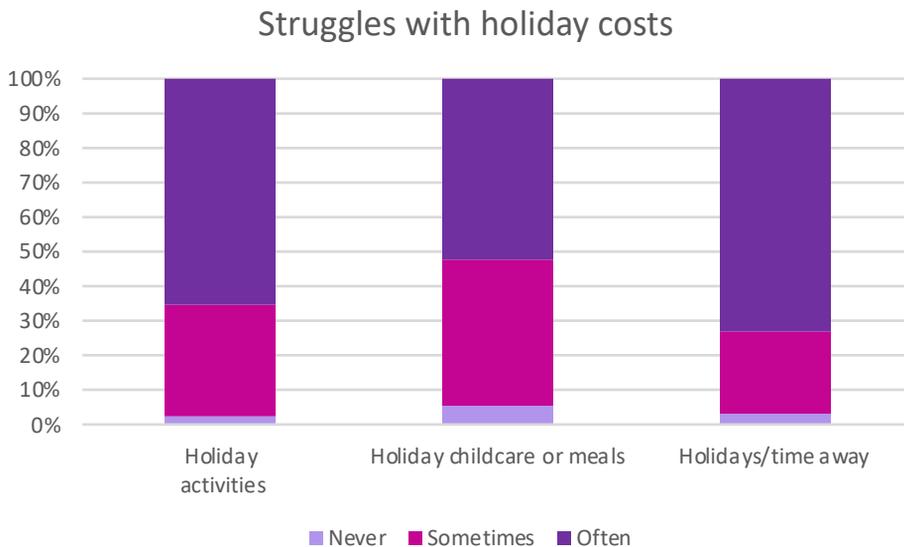
"Internet access is a real difficulty for families we work with. It is unaffordable but the lack of it is really challenging and isolating, as most services operate online now."

"[Families are] struggling to pay for fares to get to the GP or hospital, or are missing appointments due to lack of funds. Parents are not buying medication that is required such as paracetamol, emollients etc. as the GP is no longer prescribing them. It is also the same with Gluten free foods; they are very expensive."



Being unable to afford school holiday costs

With the summer holidays approaching, we were particularly interested to see how support worker's felt families would cope with this. Specifically, we asked how often they see families who cannot afford costs during the school holidays. We asked support workers how often they see: families being unable to afford or not having access to children's activities during; families being unable to afford meals or childcare, and; families being unable to have time away together during the holidays.



- 53% of workers witness families often struggling to afford food or childcare during the holiday period; 20% see this on a daily basis and 33% at least weekly.
- 65% of support workers often witness families being unable to afford activities during the holidays; 33% see this on a daily basis and 32% at least weekly.
- 73% of supporter workers see families who are often unable to afford time away together during the holidays; 41% see this on a daily basis, and another 32% at least on a weekly basis.



"Very few families can afford extra-curricular activities for their children, from going out for the odd meal to a day trip or allowing them to go swimming with their friends."

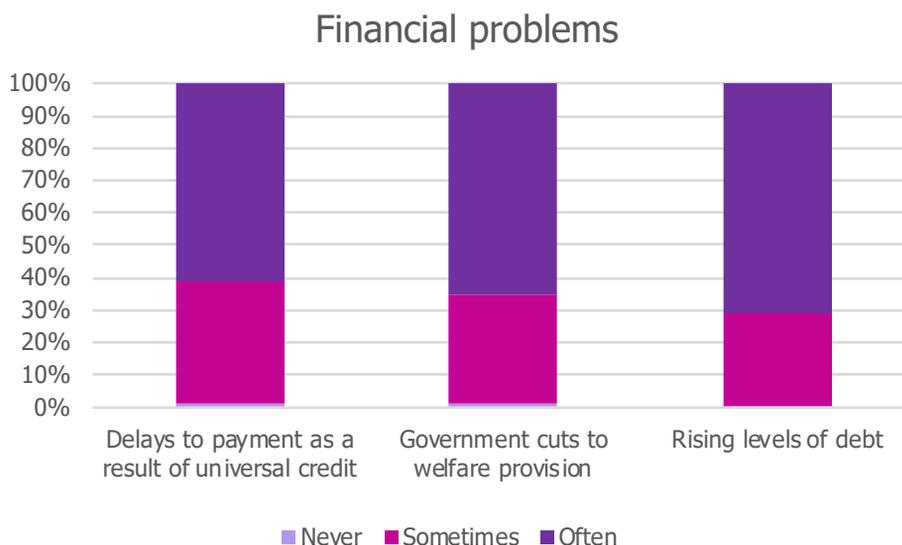
"Families don't have disposable income... Additional meals in school holidays are an added pressure."

"As children's centres have declined there is less for children to access during the school holidays. A larger number of families that we work with do not go out of the town during holiday periods."



A Growing Debt crisis

We asked support workers how often they work with: families that struggle due to delays of payments that are as a result of Universal Credit; families affected by government cuts to welfare provision, and; families who are increasingly in debt. The table below shows the percentage of support workers responded saying that they never, sometimes (less than once a week), or often (at least once a week) see families experience these financial problems.



When asked how often these families experience the issues of rising debt, delays due to Universal Credit and cuts to welfare services, nearly 100% said they saw it to some extent 30%+ reported they see families experiencing these problems on a daily basis.

- 37% of support workers are seeing families who are affected by government cuts to welfare provision on a daily basis, and a further 28% see this at least weekly.
- 35% of support workers are seeing families experiencing rising levels of debt daily, and another 35% on a weekly basis or more.
- 30% of support workers are seeing families affected by delays to Universal Credit on a daily basis, and another 31% on a weekly basis or more.



"Sanctions and delays [to benefit payments] leave families without funds for essentials, including food, sanitary products and personal hygiene products. We rely heavily on the local food banks but there are restrictions on the number of parcels families can have."

"Parents and carers tend to rely on loans and debts in order to provide. [The] expectation to have certain products means that although local authorities class them as 'luxury', in reality children and parents see them as essential (phones, internet etc.)."

Poor family relationships

Support workers noted that many of the families they work with have poor family relationships due to poverty. They describe how:

- Financial stress can increase conflict in the home.
- Poverty can lead to more family chaos.
- Many children have to act as carers for their parents and siblings.
- Some of the families receiving support end up experiencing family breakdown.
- Children can learn negative behaviours from parents and repeat them.
- Some of these problems can be further impacted by parent mental health problems.



"Many of the challenges our families face are due to long-term inter-generational issues, and parents with a lack of parenting skills because they weren't parented in a positive way themselves. This takes time and resources to support, which can be a challenge for us."

Violent crime

We asked those surveyed how often they witness violent crime (including knife crime) in the families they help:

- 85% of support workers see families who are being affected by violent crime.
- 53% of support workers reported that they have seen an increase in violent crime rates in their area in the last year.
- 8% of support workers see families affected by violent crime on a daily basis, and a further 10% see this at least once a week.
- Nearly all support workers (99%) see families affected by domestic violence; over 27% see this problem on a daily basis, and another 25% at least once a week .
- Less than 1% of support workers reported having seen a decrease in violent crime.

We also asked what forms of violent crime have changed and what support workers see as influencing this change. Forty-six percent of respondents completed the qualitative aspect of this question, reporting a range of crimes that they were aware affected the families they work with. The table below shows the percentage of respondents who mentioned increases in specific crimes.



Crime	% reporting an increase
Knife crime	49%
Gangs	15%
Gun crime	9%
Domestic abuse / violence	8%
Theft / burglaries/mugging	7%
Drug crimes	5%
Carrying weapons for safety	5%
County lines	4%
Drug use	4%
General weapons	4%
Drug dealing	2%

Knife crime was by far the most commonly reported violent crime to have increased in the last year:

- Many of the people who responded that there have been increases in knife crime in their areas also reported increases in gun crime or the use of general violent weapons, and often stated that these crimes are linked with gang crime, particularly drug dealing.
- 5% of support workers also reported that there has been an increase in the number of children they support carrying knives or weapons for their own safety, but that these children don't use the weapons to commit crimes themselves.
- Several respondents specifically mentioned the increase in "County Lines" crime for the children that they work with. This is a term used when drug gangs from big cities expand their operations to smaller towns, often using violence to drive out local dealers and exploiting children and vulnerable people to sell drugs.

Support workers believe that there are multiple reasons for the increase in violent crime. Specific reasons stated include:

- A lack of support services and activities available for children and families
- Poverty
- Parents' inability to monitor children due to having to work long hours
- Cuts to welfare and policing
- The ease of accessing weapons through the internet
- Children being unable to keep themselves safe
- Children wanting to escape their negative home life are more vulnerable to exploitation by criminals
- Children becoming gang members and being bribed to do illegal work by criminals who can offer the children things that their parents cannot afford





"Increase in knife crime. The reasons are complex and varied but partly due to the culture, policing cuts, lack of fathers being involved in their children's lives and acting as positive role models, unsociable working hours for single mothers doing low paid work such as care work and not being able to be around to know what their children are doing outside of school hours including after school and holidays, unfair society, lack of social mobility."

"Knife crime on increase especially in teenagers who are exploited. Have noticed an increase in young people being given knives as easily accessed in any supermarket. Usually to protect themselves from others also carrying knives. It is a vicious circle of events. Scared children carrying knives to protect themselves from other scared children."

"Young people are unfortunately in many cases not resilient or educated enough to have the skills or confidence or options to not fall victim to grooming, sexual exploitation or offers of money to drug deal. Culture of fear being inculcated by organised crime."

"Drug dealing, people going missing. Young People have been encouraged to deal drugs for monetary gain; this is a huge insight for this type of crime due to the change in benefits and poverty".

"The increase in the cost of living while the low income remains unchanged, the number of young people involved in drug dealing to support their families, young people who are unemployable due to criminal records and lack of qualifications. But perhaps the biggest cause of young people engaging in these activities is because there are no safe places for young people to go after school! ... young people living in difficult home situations can only seek solace in the brotherhood of gangs."

"Young people have no opportunities. Cuts in EMA. If you have been in trouble/care you are left to get involved in crime. The gap between rich and poor is widening which is clear for anyone to see. Children are feeling responsible for parents. There are high levels of trauma both in parents and young people. There have been cuts to police, cuts to youth services, cuts to children's services (basically only dealing with crisis and generally not very well), cuts to children's centres and prevention services."

"they are exposed to adverse childhoods such as... shootings, the constant sound of police, helicopters, gangs, poverty crime, and this influences young minds in a negative way, due to the media and what they see on the news etc. Some are easily impressionable and can often be used by gangs as mules to do carrying jobs as they are too young to be convicted. This is a worry in our community as poverty is the route to all these social issues, as kids want to fit in or wear nice clothing or have the latest gadgets. Sad as it is, it's the reality for a good few kids."

"Low income families in deprived areas are so much more vulnerable to gangs grooming them into sexual exploitation, drug dealing and transporting."



The levels of destitution across the UK

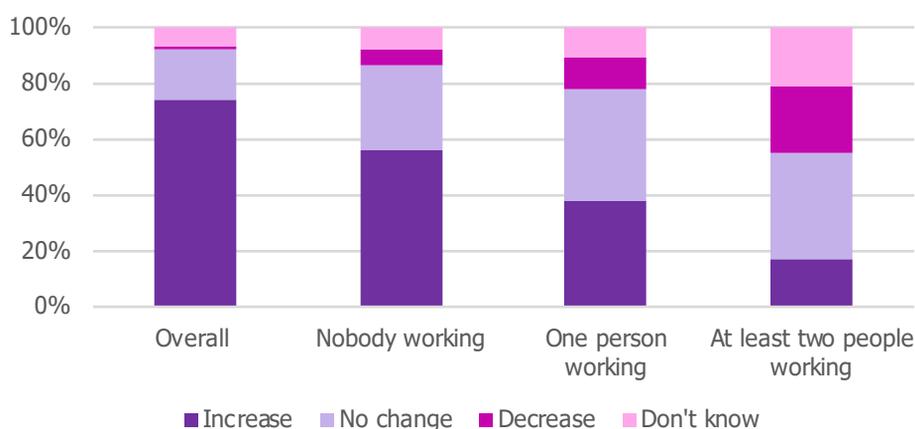
Support workers were asked what percentage of families that they work with live in destitution (an income less than £70 per week for an adult, £90 for a lone parent with one child or £140 for a couple with two children, or any family that has not been able to afford two essentials over the last month, e.g. a home, food, heating, lighting, clothes, shoes or basic toiletries).¹

We also asked if there had been any changes in destitution among the families that support workers are working with over the last year.

- Support workers reported that 54% of families they are working with are living in destitution.
- 35% of those surveyed reported that 70% + of the families they work with are living in destitution
- Nearly three quarters (74%) of support workers have seen an increase in the last year in the number of families they work with who are in destitution.
- Only 1% of support workers have seen a decrease in the number of families needing financial support.

The following table shows a breakdown of changes in the number of families needing financial support in different family working circumstances:

Change in families needing financial support in the Last Year



- There was an increase in the number of families needing financial support across all groups
- 18% of support workers have seen an increase in the number of families needing financial support when at least two people in the household are working.
- 39% have seen an increase in the number of families needing support where one person in the family is working.

¹ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/destitution-uk-2018>



- 56% have seen increases in the number of non-working families needing financial support.

Across all family types, it was more common for financial situations to either stay the same or get worse for families than it was to improve. Only 1% of support workers have seen a decrease in the number of families needing financial support. To further examine how poverty affects those who are working, we also asked support workers how often they work with families for whom work does not pay enough to make ends meet.

- Only 3% of support workers reported that they do not see this problem at all among the families they support.
- 21% of support workers see families who are working but are not earning enough to make ends meet on a daily basis, and a further 28% see this more than once a week.

Throughout the survey, support workers highlighted how parents that are working have particular problems. Parents having to work long hours to be able to support their children can have a negative impact for the child; children are often having to be left unattended for long periods of time, and parents can become less available to engage with their children as a result.



"There has been an increase in people working who are in severe financial need due to temporary agency jobs and zero hours contracts"

"Some families who work can be destitute in their own right as they do not get the same levels of financial support, for example on most funding application forms if you tick the box that they are working they are automatically deemed as not being destitute."

"There appears to be an increase in families with financial difficulties where one or both parents work and yet they report living hand to mouth and increasingly have to turn to food banks when a crisis or something unexpected happens."

"If they are working in low paid part time work and on ESA, they cannot access affordable training and courses to increase their skills and knowledge and open up more opportunities to increase their income, avoid debt and improve their lives."

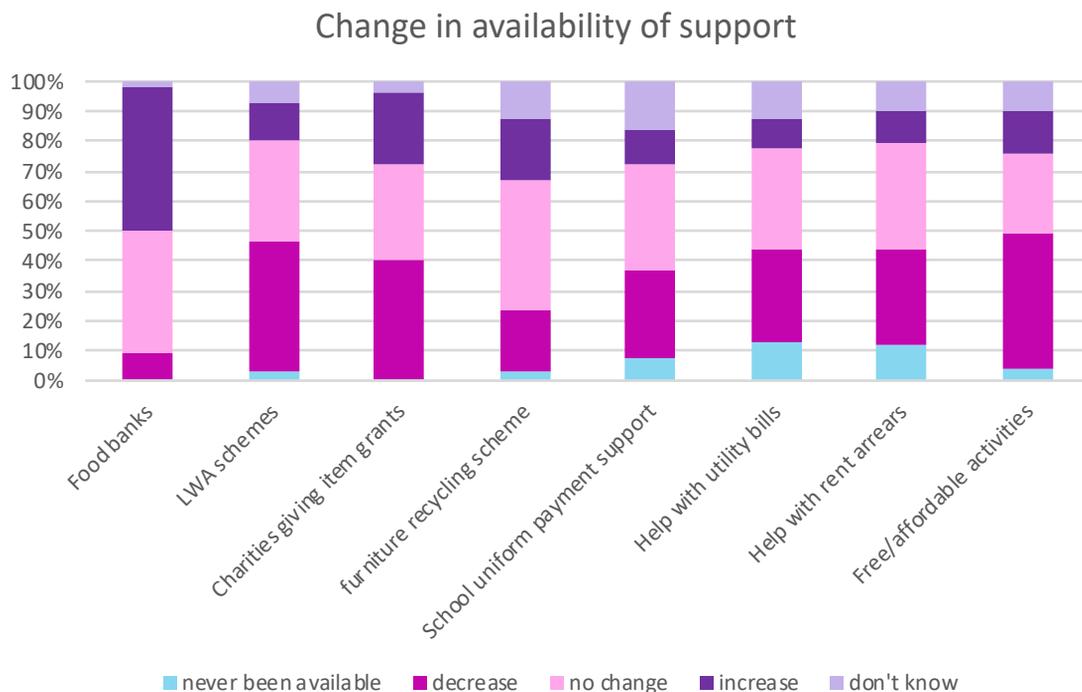
"Children have little parental engagement and are home alone because their primary carer/s are working well above 45 hours per week to try and meet the cost of living."

"Parents have to leave children unattended for long periods of time due to work commitments and fear of losing their job."



The support available to families in poverty

We asked support workers whether they have seen changes in the availability of support to the families they work with in the last year, specifically food banks, local authority welfare assistance schemes, grant-giving charities, furniture recycling schemes, support with school uniform payment, help with utility bills and rent arrears, and free/affordable activities for children.



Although children and families in poverty are facing an increasingly challenging range of issues and difficulties, respondents reported a mixed picture in the availability of support services to help these families in the last year.

- Very few support workers reported that they had seen an increase in the availability of support. It was much more common to report that support had either stayed the same or decreased over the last year.
- The only substantive increase in support over the last year was the increase in the number of families support workers have seen using food banks; with 49% of support workers reported an increase in these.
- Less than 15% reported an increase in availability of support for school uniform costs, help with utility bills, help with rent arrears, local authority welfare assistance schemes, and free/affordable activities for children.
- 20%-25% reported an increase in furniture recycling schemes and the number of charities providing grants for household items.



"Less children are meeting thresholds for support. At one time if a child received pupil premium they could access activities in school. Now schools are strapped themselves and ask for payments towards costs. I have parents who have nowhere to turn to when it comes to buying uniforms for their children. There are less and less charities to refer to and now charity terms are very specific and so it's hard to find a charity where the family fits the criterion. More families are in rent arrears and utility debt with no support available to them, unless case is very extreme."

"Local charities are now stretched to capacity due to more families requiring support since the introduction of universal credit, and cannot provide support to everyone that requests or needs it."

"We are seeing more and more families pushed to the brink of desperation due to having little or no money and having to rely on foodbanks etc. for essential items, including baby milk and nappies. Often families do not even have the bus fare to travel to foodbanks."

"Many activities that schools used to provide are no longer provided e.g., free arts and sports activities. On a low income or even a moderate one, children no longer can access these opportunities leading to lower life chances, aspirations, self-confidence, learning achievements and a less fair society."

"The closure of children's centres have reduced accessible activities for children. Antenatal and post-natal services now often require mothers to travel to central sites for care - which is not possible financially for many. Access to public fund services is not possible for asylum seekers - these new mums struggle to buy baby milk, clothes and equipment from the same budget as before pregnancy. Asylum seeker families I work with cannot claim DLA or transport costs for the children and are unable to afford transport to the many medical appointments and assessments they are required to attend."



Concluding Remarks

This survey provides invaluable insight into the struggles that children and families in poverty are currently facing across the UK; our findings show the extent to which front-line workers see poverty impacting on children on a daily basis.

Overall, it is clear that children and young people growing up in poverty are experiencing a range of difficulties. Support workers are seeing children going without the basic essentials, including bed, food and clothes. Families also struggle to afford essential health care. School holidays are a struggle for many families in poverty, with limited access to affordable activities for children, struggles to provide additional meals, and difficulties affording childcare. Support workers are seeing more families in which one or two parents are working needing financial support, and have seen an increase in levels of destitution among the families that they work with in the last year. Support workers see that many children in poverty are exposed to a range of adverse experiences, including domestic violence, neglect, abuse, parent incarceration and substance/alcohol misuse. Increases in crime rates are making these children even more vulnerable to exploitation and negative outcomes. Whilst all of these issues are prominent among children and families in poverty, there seems to be very few measures of support being increased to help tackle these problems.

Whilst this report focused on the general issues for children facing poverty, our survey also allowed us to gather a wide range of in-depth information about the impact of poverty for children's experiences in education and general wellbeing, as well as highlighting an increasing housing crisis for these families. We will be following up with additional reports on these issues through the coming year.

We are very grateful to all of the support workers that took the time to respond to this survey when already stretched, without whom we wouldn't be able to highlight the alarming conditions that children in poverty face day to day, or demonstrate the need for increased support in each of these areas. Thank you.



Buttle UK, 15 Greycoat Place, London, SW1P 1SB.
Registered charity number; 313007 and (Scotland); SCO37997
@BUTTLEUK