



Addressing the root causes of child poverty in the UK

Debate briefing

Monday 29th April 2024

Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition (CYPMHC) welcome this short debate on addressing the root causes of child poverty in the UK on Monday 29th April. There are significant links between poverty and mental health, and over recent years, there has been rises in both the rates of child poverty and mental health problems in children and young people. This briefing provides further insights on the links between mental health and poverty, and sets out recommendations for change.

Summary

- Approximately 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years had a mental health problem in 2022/23 (NHS Digital, 2023) and this prevalence has risen in tandem with child poverty. In 2022/23, an estimated 4.3 million children were in poverty in the UK after housing costs, up from 3.6 million in 2010-11 (DWP, 2023)
- There are bidirectional links between poverty and mental health. For example:
 - Children aged 8-16 with a mental health problem were more than twice as likely to live in a household that had fallen behind with rent, bills or mortgage payments (18.7%) than those without a mental health problem (6.8%) (NHS Digital, 2023).
 - Children from the poorest 20% of households are four times as likely to have serious mental health difficulties by the age of 11 as those from the wealthiest 20% (Morrison Gutman et al., 2015).
- Child poverty can have various implications on mental health and there are adverse effects associated with child poverty. For example:
 - Rates of child abuse and neglect are five times higher for children in families with low socioeconomic status compared to those with higher socioeconomic status (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).
- Inequalities exist across the experience of childhood poverty with some groups more susceptible to experiencing child poverty.
- Centre for Mental Health and the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition are calling for:
 - **A Minimum Income Guarantee to ensure that everyone has enough money to live a healthy life.**
 - **A new Child Poverty Act to end child poverty by 2030.**
 - **Better access to support for children and young people and families including: evidence based parenting programmes, early support hubs, whole educational approaches to mental health and increased investment in Integrated Care Systems.**

1. Links between mental health and child poverty

There has been a rise in the prevalence of mental health needs among children and young people over recent years, and in 2023, approximately 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years had a mental health problem (NHS Digital, 2023). Poverty is a key risk factor for poor mental health, and we have seen rates of child poverty rise in tandem with mental health problems. In 2022/23, an estimated 4.3 million children were in poverty in the UK after housing costs, up from 3.6 million in 2010-11 (DWP, 2023).

Experiencing poverty at any age can be harmful, but research indicates particularly harmful impacts for children and young people. It is estimated that children from the poorest 20% of households are four times as likely to have serious mental health problems by the age of 11 as those from the wealthiest 20% (Morrison Gutman et al., 2015). What is more, children and young people with an identified mental health problem are much more likely to live in households where there are financial pressures. Data from NHS Digital shows that:

- Children aged 8-16 with a mental health problem were more than twice as likely to live in a household that had fallen behind with rent, bills or mortgage payments (18.7%) than those without a mental health problem (6.8%) (NHS Digital, 2023).
- Children with a probable mental health problem (19.9%) were also more than twice as likely to live in a household that could not afford to keep the home warm enough than those without a mental health problem (7.6%) and almost five times as likely to live in a household that could not afford to buy food or had to use a foodbank (15.3% vs 3.5%) (Ibid).

Living in poverty also has wider implications for children and young people. For example, child poverty often restricts access to green spaces and exercise, leads to poorer access to quality health care and support services, reduces the perception of self control, self esteem and confidence and increases the risk of adverse childhood experiences (Centre for Mental Health, 2023). Exposure to poverty as a child creates and compounds adversity, driving poor health and social outcomes later in life as a result (Ibid).

What is more, poverty is associated with an increased risk of experiencing multiple adverse childhood experiences (including neglect, abuse, bereavement, and having a parent/carer with a substance misuse issue or severe mental illness) leading to increased risk of mental ill health. Rates of child abuse and neglect are five times higher for children in families with low socioeconomic status compared to those with higher socioeconomic status (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

2. Inequalities in childhood poverty

Childhood poverty and other associated risks, such as poor housing, does not fall evenly across the population, with some children being disproportionately affected. Recent years have also seen high inflation levels and the associated cost-of-living crisis exacerbate wealth, racial and gender inequalities, leaving some groups of children at high risk of experiencing poverty and the adverse associated effects.

Children of single parents, and in particular single mothers, are at higher risk of falling below the poverty line (Cribb et al, 2022) putting both the parent and child's mental health at higher risk. Research conducted during the pandemic found that over 50% of services supporting women and girls identified financial problems and poverty as key drivers of mental health issues. In addition to the income gap, women are more greatly affected by the cost of unpaid labour, including child care, than men, which has recently been calculated to amount to £3.4 billion in losses due to mental ill health (Centre for Mental Health, 2024). Supporting mothers, both financially and with their mental health is imperative for tackling childhood poverty.

The risk of childhood poverty can be exacerbated when parents experience disadvantage, including mental ill health and disability (Centre for Mental Health, 2023). Furthermore, living in child poverty with a caregiver with mental health problems can also have negative longer term outcomes. For example, children who live in poverty with caregivers experiencing mental health problems are at higher risk of longer term social and emotional development issues and poor mental health (NIHR, 2023).

Additionally, people from racialised communities are 2.5 times more likely to live in relative poverty, and up to 3 times more likely to be in persistent poverty than white people (Butler, 2022). Figures from the Child Poverty Action Group show that 47% of children from Black and ethnic minority groups are living in poverty, compared to 24% of white children (Child Poverty Action Group, n.d.) The cumulative effect of experiencing racism, for both children and adults, in addition to these structural barriers, have a significant impact on the mental health of marginalised communities (Bignall et al, 2019).

3. Recommendations

Increasing incomes and reducing costs for the most deprived not only tackles child poverty but also improves mental health. To do this we are calling for a Minimum Income Guarantee to ensure that everyone has enough money to afford to live a healthy life, alongside seeking to increase overall incomes, particularly for the most deprived. The Government should also pay heed to the Association of Directors of Public Health's call for a new Child Poverty Act. The Department for Education, Department for Work and Pensions and HM Treasury should work to deliver on the Association of Directors of Public Health's call for a new Child Poverty Act to eradicate child poverty by 2030.

Furthermore, every child and family should have access to the appropriate support for their mental health. Every parent and carer needs access to effective support, therefore it is crucial to prioritise whole family approaches to support and implement comprehensive support for families, including evidence-based parenting programmes. There should also be greater support within schools and the community through the full roll out of early support hubs in every local area to increase the provision of early intervention in the community and whole education approaches to mental health should be embedded in every education setting to make schools and colleges mentally healthier places to be. This support must sit around a system that is fully resourced to support the increasing level of mental health needs, and for this to occur there must be increased investment in Integrated Care Systems to offer a comprehensive pathway of mental health support for children and young people.

Recommendations:

1. The Government should commit to a Minimum Income Guarantee to ensure that everyone has enough money to afford to live a healthy life.
1. The Department for Education, Department for Work and Pensions and HM Treasury should work to deliver on the Association of Directors of Public Health's call for a new Child Poverty Act to eradicate child poverty by 2030.
2. The Department of Health and Social Care should prioritise whole family approaches to support and implement comprehensive support for families, including evidence-based parenting programmes.
3. The Department of Health and Social Care should invest in a national network of early support hubs in every local area to increase the provision of early intervention support in the community.
4. The Government should fund a fully resourced, national implementation programme to support every school and college to adopt a whole school approach to mental health and wellbeing including a full roll out of Mental Health Support Teams.
5. The Government should increase investment to Integrated Care Systems to deliver a comprehensive pathway of mental health support.

About Centre for Mental Health

Centre for Mental Health is an independent charity. We take the lead in challenging injustices in policies, systems and society, so that everyone can have better mental health. By building research evidence to create fairer mental health policy, we are pursuing equality, social justice and good mental health for all. Centre for Mental Health are proud hosts of the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition.

About the Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition

The Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition is a collaborative network of nearly 300 organisations and individuals dedicated to advocating for and influencing policy in relation to the mental health needs of babies, children, and young people. Our coalition consists of diverse stakeholders, including mental health organisations, youth support services, educational institutions, and concerned individuals, all united by a shared commitment to improving the well-being of children. We aim to raise awareness of the importance of mental health and ensure that children and young people have access to the necessary support and services.

For more information, please contact Zainab Shafan-Azhar, at zainab.shafan-azhar@cypmhc.org.uk or Bethan Bottomley, at bethan.bottomley@centreformentalhealth.org.uk

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