

Living standards for low income families have worsened since the summer amid the impact of the coronavirus pandemic, according to the findings of a new report



utler, writes about how urgent action is needed to tackle poverty and

At times like this, when nearly everyone is struggling in some way, it is tempting to turn in on ourselves, as individuals and as a nation. We saw this during the first lockdown when people stock-piled essential supplies and in the recent decision to reduce the UK's foreign aid budget.

Fortunately, though, the overwhelming response to the pandemic has been to reach out generously to those in need through the spontaneous emergence of local mutual aid schemes across the country, alongside countless everyday acts of kindness and neighbourliness.

The call to 'remember the poor' runs through the Bible. The 'Poverty in the Pandemic' report that we are publishing today with the Child Poverty Action Group is a modern-day call to remember the poor. Based on a survey of nearly 700 low-income families with children, it offers a stark insight into the experiences of these families, many of whom have seen their lives turned upside down by the pandemic. This year has been a difficult one for many of us, but these challenges are a lot harder when you are short of money.

Sudden loss of earnings, increased living costs, navigating a complex benefits system, falling into debt - these are just some of the challenges facing families during the crisis. Financial worries are adding considerably to the pressures on families, pushing many of them to breaking point:

"Coronavirus has exacerbated my whole family's mental health to the point that we are about to break up. Stress, anxiety and strain in terms of finances have broken us as a family and created so many other issues between us all."



Many of the parents we heard from had lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic, and were struggling to cope on universal credit, having never been in this position before:

"I've gone from earning £2500 [a month] to getting benefit of £74 a week. I've worked all my life, have 37 years of [National Insurance] contributions and they have given me £74 a week. I will lose my house, my car, my life through no fault of mine."

Overall, around three-quarters of the families who responded to our survey said they are finding it "difficult" or "very difficult" to manage financially – and this proportion has remained pretty constant throughout the pandemic, with no sign of improvement in recent months. 6 in 10 families said they are struggling to cover the cost of three or more basic essentials, including food, utilities, rent, travel, or child-related costs.

As temporary support schemes are withdrawn or phased out, and more people lose their jobs, a growing number of families are becoming reliant on the social security system. This is exposing problems with the current system, including the five-week wait for the first payment in universal credit, inadequate benefit levels, and the unjust impact of the benefit cap and two-child limit.

The pandemic has also highlighted systemic issues that both lead people into poverty, and for some permanently hold them there. So tackling these deep systemic entrenched issues needs to happen. This takes time. In the short term, though, we must take urgent action simply to keep poverty and destitution from the door.

To address this immediate need, the report recommends that children's benefits are increased and that the temporary £20 per week uplift to universal credit is retained, so that families who are already struggling to get by are not faced with a further drop in their income next April. Only then will we ensure that low-income families with children receive the support they need over the difficult months that lie ahead.

We must remember the poor - not only by cooking meals for local families or donating to the nearest food bank, but also by advocating for a more generous social security system and for the deep radical changes needed to tackle the underlying drivers of poverty in the longer-term.

More information:

- Church of England and CPAG, ['Poverty in the Pandemic: An update on the impact of Covid-19 on low-income families and children'](#) (December 2020).

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