

The State of Child Poverty 2023

Exploring the changing face of child poverty in a
cost-of-living crisis

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is the fifth year we have published a State of Child Poverty report. This time, we heard from over 1,200 frontline professionals who responded to our survey, which included questions about children and young people's wellbeing, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), education, access to basics - including food, utilities, clothing and basic furniture - and their lived experience of poverty. Collectively, these frontline professionals work with around **200,000 children living in poverty**.

Comparisons with last year's findings demonstrate a very clear downward trend in the standard of living for these children and young people. Most alarming of all, frontline workers reported that **60% live in destitution** - a 15% point rise on what we reported last year.

The major finding of this report is the significant and enduring impact that the cost-of-living crisis is having on children's wellbeing and life prospects. Inflation is having a disproportionate impact on families living in poverty, because a higher proportion of their household budget is spent on these key items. Of the families that respondents spoke for, they reported an inability to access the following basics for the following proportions:

- 57% cannot afford enough food and nutrition
- 58% cannot afford gas and electricity
- 63% go without basic furniture such as beds, sofas and appliances
- 49% are not able to afford their rent or equivalent
- 65% go without IT equipment for education or employment

Children and young people are going without enough food to sustain fundamental levels of physical and mental health, which is impacting on their education and both causing and exacerbating trauma. Similarly, households are going without heating or washing due to the significant costs of doing so. This is leaving children without basic levels of hygiene and wellbeing, with many living in cold, damp homes. They cannot afford the basic standard of physical care required to make their attendance in education possible, let alone the essential resources required to travel to their education settings, or access learning online and at home.

These households are marginalised by their financial constraints. The trauma caused by, or resulting in, the circumstances they are living through is increasing. We measured this by asking respondents about adverse childhood experiences (or ACEs) in the home. The most severe were:

- **Mental illness** is present in 70% of the households
- **Domestic violence** in 64% of the households
- **Neglect** in 55% of the households
- **Parental separation** in 69% of the households
- **Verbal abuse** in 65% of the households

Going without basics has worsened the already significant national mental health crisis that many children and young people are enduring. **The high level of mental illness** is linked to poor educational outcomes and increasing numbers of children being unable to attend or access education. When describing the problem, frontline workers reported that:

- Mental illness is not being treated sufficiently or early enough to prevent long-term impacts. Families feel abandoned, and problems are escalating.
- Home lives are incredibly stressful for parents and children alike in light of the cost-of-living crisis. This is leading to toxic coping mechanisms including substance abuse, neglect and self-harm, and is contributing to family breakdowns, including increased emotional and physical abuse.
- Children are very isolated by their circumstances, particularly compared to their peers; they struggle with building relationships and accessing opportunities outside their homes.
- Many are suffering with poor self-esteem and lack confidence, at a level that stops them from attending school or college.

Respondents told us repeatedly that a tipping point has been breached, with soaring year on year demand exceeding their capacity to cope. Between 60-70% of the families they support require critical services, such as financial support for rent and utilities, as well as food banks, welfare assistance and most of all, mental health services. The largest declines in service availability over the last year were evident in both mental health services and support finding accommodation. The latter is contributing to a growing fear for frontline workers, namely that rent arrears and inability to afford accommodation is going to lead to a further housing/homelessness crisis.

As a result of these findings, Buttle UK has two main calls for action. The evidence presented here around the inaccessibility of food and utilities for low-income families demonstrates a clear need for more, and enduring, financial support directly for these basics. The Cost-of-Living Payments afforded to families on Universal Credit and other DWP benefits are not enough to plug the gap between household income and outgoings. They are also intermittent and time-limited. Therefore, we suggest the following:

- We 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 scrapped¹. In conjunction with this, we support the National Education Union's No Child Left Behind campaign, which makes similar calls for specific support for children facing educational inequality due to poverty².
- Universal Credit payments are not adequate to cover the costs that families are facing. The 10.1% uplift in April 2023 reflected inflation, but this report and other studies demonstrate that families on low incomes are disproportionately affected by inflation. While every household received a £400 payment towards their energy bills across 2022-23 through the Energy Bill Support Scheme, research also show that low-income households are three times more exposed to rising energy costs compared to highest-income households³. Therefore, we stand with the Trussell Trust and JRF's call for an Essentials Guarantee. This proposes an independent process to regularly determine an 'essentials guarantee level', based on the cost of essentials (such as food, utilities and vital household goods) for the adults in a

¹ [Child Poverty Action Group | All Kids Count Campaign](#)

² [NEU | No Child Left Behind Campaign](#)

³ [Institute for Fiscal Studies | Cost of Living Crisis](#)

household (excluding rent and council tax) that Universal Credit's standard allowance must at least meet after any deductions⁴.

- We stand by our call for a dedicated Cabinet Minister for Children and Young People⁵ to realise a England-wide Child Poverty Strategy, following in the example of Scotland and Wales, where action is beginning to take place. This role should begin with a thorough review of the adequacy of current state support for children and young people living in poverty, in order to better understand the relationship between poverty, inequality and lifelong impacts in our society today.

Our report shows that the frightening fall in household living standards has rippling impacts on mental health, education and access to opportunities that should be afforded to all children and young people. In light of these circumstances, we urge changes to our education institutions, local authorities and health services. These are:

- We stand with the major campaigns being lead by Mind, including the campaign for mentally ill individuals living in poverty to have a robust package of benefits to help them through the crisis⁶, and their campaign for children and young people's mental health services to be fully funded and more accessible⁷.
- Buttle UK supports calls to make access to mental health support for children easier, whether that is through making Mental Health Support Teams available in all schools, or the proposal by Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition for community based Early Support Hubs⁸.

'We are failing to help families, children of this generation do not stand a chance in life, it is so wrong that the families that we work with think that how they are living is normal and accept it' (frontline worker, 2023)

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

⁵ [Children's Alliance | Press Release September 2022](#)

⁶ [Mind | Benefits Campaign](#)

⁷ [Mind | Children and Young People's Mental Health Campaign](#)

⁸ [Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition | Fund the Hubs](#)

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The findings in this report reflect the lived experiences of children in some of the hardest-hit households in the UK. As a grant-making charity in its 70th year, the evidence in this report is an articulation of the thousands of stories we hear of families battling to overcome crises such as domestic abuse, estrangement, refugee status, critical mental or physical illness, substance abuse and more, while also struggling with the devastating impact of financial hardship. Buttle UK grants of up to £2,400 are given for items and activities to support children's wellbeing, engagement in education and their home environment. We grant personalised packages of items that help children and young people to eat, sleep and relax in homes that are fit for purpose, and allow them to access and engage in their education, hobbies and interests. The grant package often includes activities that encourage children and young people to build and sustain relationships, friendships, and wellbeing. Our support aims to be impactful in both the immediate and the long term.

However, our grants are not awarded in isolation. Grants are applied for and managed by frontline workers representing charities and services from education, family support, charity, housing, social work sectors and beyond. These support services are crucial for our grants to succeed. They provide the critical frontline care needed to help families through crisis, while our grants serve to build on these foundations and help families move on. Our unique position grants us access to a huge network of frontline workers. They are witnesses to the lived reality of child poverty, and it is through their perspectives that we aim to illuminate the state of child poverty in the UK each year. This is our fifth report and it is based on the feedback of over 1,200 respondents to our SOCP survey. We are deeply grateful for the effort, care and honesty with which they responded in such large numbers.

Context

The UK is experiencing a crisis. A national conversation is being played out in the media about the rampant rise of the cost-of-living, with mounting prices of consumer goods, utilities and basics. Inflation reached a 41-year high in October 2022, while the cost of food prices reached a 45-year high in March 2023⁹. These are unprecedented and staggering surges, and while myriad analyses of the cost-of-living crisis indicate that many UK households are suffering, it is biting hardest on families who were already experiencing financial hardship. This is because they effectively experience higher inflation due to the higher proportion of household income spent on food and energy. This is particularly acute if the household is made up of a large family or has higher energy needs¹⁰.

Many lower-income households have been pushed to the brink of deep poverty for some time, as they were disproportionately affected by the ongoing economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Children living in larger families, from Black and ethnic minority groups and from lone-parent families are more vulnerable to child poverty¹¹, factors which have been shown to align with increased vulnerability due to the impact of COVID-19

⁹ [Rising Cost-of-living in the UK | House of Commons Library](#)

¹⁰ [Institute for Government | Cost-of-living Crisis](#)

¹¹ [Facts and Figures | Child Poverty Action Group](#)

pandemic¹². Inequality has found a breeding ground in the apex of the pandemic restrictions, recent international conflict contributing to economic and supply chain difficulties, and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis.

There have been attempts to address the ongoing crisis for vulnerable households. The government established the Help for Households scheme in 2022, which has issued Cost-of-Living Payments for various groups, as well introducing the Energy Bills Support Scheme and Energy Price Guarantee (EPG). Nonetheless, these payments, alongside stagnant household incomes, are not keeping up with increased prices and do not offer the breadth of support required for the very most vulnerable households. There is evidence that the cost-of-living percentage point gap is at its widest between the rich and poor since records began in 2006¹³.

These concerns were reflected by the findings of our 2022 State of Child Poverty report¹⁴. At the time of its writing, we predicted that things would get harder in the coming year for the myriad reasons outlined above. The reality has met and outstripped these predictions. Our findings last year predicted a transition from a pandemic-related mental health epidemic to an additional physical health crisis due to poor 'eating and heating', in conjunction with a real sense that frontline workers could do no more as their services were at breaking point. This report illuminates their feedback just shy of one year on, as we explore not only the frontline's capacity to support, but the way that their roles are changing in light of the significant and enduring challenges families are currently facing.

Survey respondents

Our fifth annual State of Child Poverty survey was open to respondents between 18 April and 9 May 2023. Invites were sent to the network of frontline workers who have applied for a Buttle UK grant within the last five years. We received **1,240 responses**, an increase of 18% on the 2022 responses and 80% more than in 2021. This provides perspectives from a broader cross-section of the support services working with children and young people living in poverty. As Buttle UK is a UK-wide charity, we received survey responses from workers across England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

In total, the survey respondents reported that, collectively, they support approximately **203,500** children and young people every year. This is a significant increase on last year's 60,000 children, which is most likely linked to the shifts in numbers of respondents from each sector and client group we invite to take part. It could also be a reflection of the increasing caseloads of individual support workers.

Table 1 shows the split of the respondents by sector. As with previous reports our largest and second largest groups respectively were social service workers and third sector workers. This year, the largest change was in the number of respondents from local authorities and housing providers, both of which increased significantly. Positively, this has created a more balanced representation of different sectors.

¹² [COVID-19 Impact on Child Poverty | House of Lords Library](#)

¹³ [Cost-of-living Gap between Rich and Poor | Resolution Foundation](#)

¹⁴ [State of Child Poverty 2022 | Buttle UK](#)

Table 1. Breakdown of respondents by sector

Sector	Number	Percentage
Social Services	340	27%
Charity / Voluntary	301	24%
Local Authority (non-Social Services)	245	20%
Housing Provider / Supported Accommodation	172	14%
Education	96	8%
Other	56	5%
Public Health / NHS	30	2%
	1,240	100%

These shifting proportions have changed the representation of the client groups that our survey respondents support, as seen in Table 2. 60% of all respondents worked with families in a role related to Child Protection, Family Support or Domestic Abuse. Early Help or Homelessness support were also well represented.

We saw a significant decline in both numbers and proportions of frontline workers supporting Estranged Young People. This reflects wider research undertaken by Buttle UK which highlights the invisibility and declining support available to this critically vulnerable group¹⁵, who we are campaigning to raise awareness for. For reference, we define this group as *young people aged between 16-20 years old who are estranged from their parents or carers, often leaving abusive, neglectful or disruptive homes. They do not receive financial, social or emotional support from parents or carers as a result of this estrangement*. The fall in representation for this age group since last year may have impacted the overall findings of this year's survey, in terms of representation of young people living independently (rather than children and young people living in the family home).

Table 2. Breakdown of respondents by client group

Client Group	2023		2022	
	%	No.	%	No.
Child Protection / Child in Need	20%	247	32%	329
Family Support	19%	236	8%	80
Domestic Abuse	19%	229	25%	262
Early Help	13%	163	5%	57
Housing / Homelessness	11%	137	6%	62
Looked After Children	4%	55	2%	25
Estranged Young People	4%	47	13%	133
Asylum Seekers / Refugees	2%	25	1%	9
Young Parents	2%	21	2%	18
Kinship Care	1%	10	2%	20
Other / Mixed Client Group	6%	70	4%	47
		1240		1042

¹⁵ [Surviving Estrangement | Buttle UK](#)

OUR FINDINGS

Section 1: Life in destitution

Destitution is a term used to describe the absolute lowest standard of living any adult, child or young person can experience; the lived reality is degrading and unsustainable. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) summarise 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 JRF have also recently described the increased speed with which families are reaching the threshold for destitution due to the cost-of-living crisis¹⁶. Our survey shows this same trend. It is incredibly alarming that respondents of this year's State of Child Poverty survey report that **60%** of the children they support live in destitution. This compares to 45% reported in 2022, and 36% in 2021. By extension, the families our frontline workers are supporting includes approximately **122,000 children living in destitution**. The year-on-year change between the last three survey cohorts dramatically illustrates the progressively worsening circumstances for children in poverty.

It is critical to frame the context of this report. We are talking not just about significant hardship, but life-changing and life-limiting deep poverty. Respondents tell us that of the 80,000 supported children not described as living in destitution, many of them are on the edge or tipping into this abyss.

Table 3. Percentage of families struggling to afford the basics

Unable to afford...	Percentage of families				
	2021 % reported	2022 % reported	2023 % reported	Difference 2022-23	Difference 2021-23
Furniture/appliances	59%	63%	63%	No change	+4%
Food	43%	55%	57%	+2%	+14%
Child clothes/toys	48%	51%	52%	+1%	+4%
Gas/electric	45%	57%	58%	+1%	+13%
Rent	44%	47%	49%	+2%	+5%
Clean home/clothes	43%	47%	49%	+2%	+6%
Bed	30%	28%	29%	+1%	-1%
IT equipment	66%	66%	65%	-1%	-1%
Internet access	57%	54%	52%	-2%	-5%

¹⁶ [Destitution in the UK | Joseph Rowntree Foundation](#)

For a second year, the reported proportion of families unable to afford household basics has risen almost uniformly, as seen in Table 3. Most concerning, the increases are apparent in absolute essentials such as food, clothing and rent. Even aside from focusing on the differences between datasets over time, it is concerning to note that over half of the families that frontline workers support could not afford food, gas, electricity or clothing. Almost 1 in 3 families are not able to provide a bed for their children to sleep in at night.

The only basics which have apparently become marginally more accessible since 2022 are IT equipment and access to the internet. However, 65% and 52% respectively still cannot afford these items, which are critical for education and employment. Therefore, significant improvements in accessibility are clearly still needed.

1.1 Poverty and Inflation

The UK Government has aimed to address the cost-of-living crisis by the introduction of a package of support, which varies by nation. The extent of the success of this package, including one-off payments and caps for bills, is yet to be fully realised, but the indications in this report show that it is not enough. In this year's survey, we asked how *pre-existing* financial hardship was changing in light of the increasing cost of basics and whether state support for these basics could create a net positive change for families in poverty.

Chart 1. The changing impact of poverty

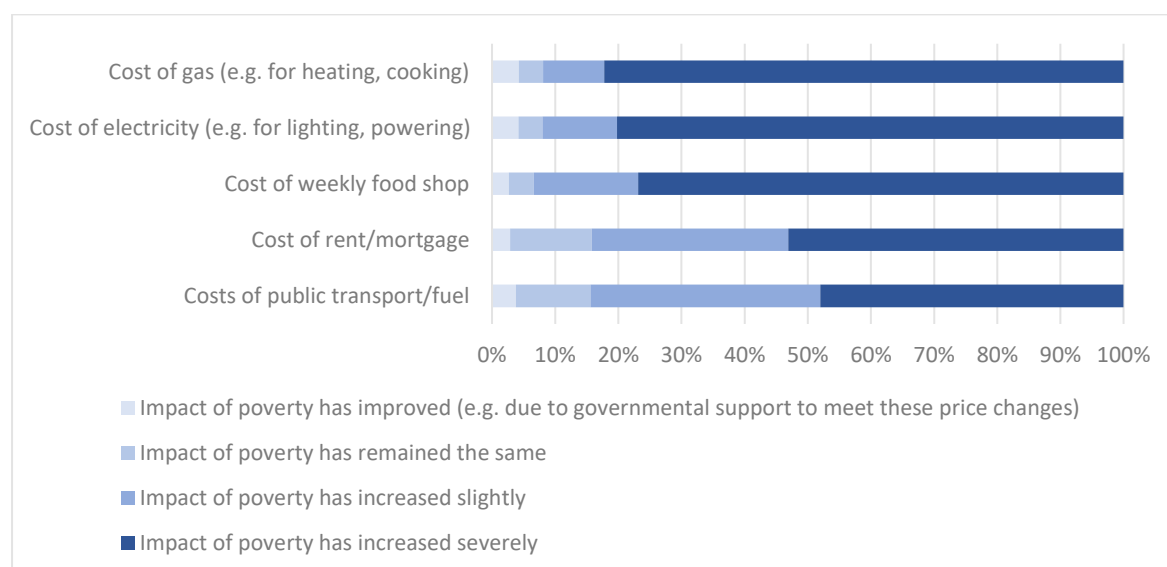


Chart 1 shows the responses we received, and reflects respondents' perspectives on change over the last year. Very few frontline workers reported that governmental support was improving or remotely meeting the changing demands caused by inflation. It is clear that the increase in the price of gas, electricity and food is significantly worsening the impact of poverty, with 82%, 80% and 77% of respondents reporting a severe increase respectively. Even where the most positive outcomes were reported, i.e. the impact of poverty had improved or at least remained the same, this was limited to 16% of respondents respectively for the costs of rent and public transport.

This data helps support the assertion that the current financial climate is significantly and negatively changing the face of child poverty. In order to better understand this, survey respondents were invited to share how inflation and the cost-of-living crisis was changing the behaviours of the families they support. The common themes reported were:

- Many families are defaulting on their bills and rent payments, leading to evictions and homelessness. Additionally, fear of homelessness is damaging the wellbeing of children in the home, who are witnessing their parents' stress and anxiety.
- Diminishing or total loss of spare income or 'rainy-day' funds to afford any items or activities that afford children freedom, fun, enjoyment and time outside of the home. This has a significant negative impact on overall wellbeing for children and parents.
- Feelings of isolation, inadequacy and failure for parents/carers, who turn to negative coping strategies such as substance abuse or fall into mental illness. In turn, children are not well looked after or supported at a critical time of need.
- An increasing number of relationship breakdowns due to immense stress and pressure to cover the bills.
- Many parents and young people are taking on unsustainable hours or shifts to cover their outgoings, which then reduces their capacity to provide emotional and social support at home. Some are turning to crime in order to fund the basics they and their families need to survive.
- A number of women are staying in abusive relationships, as they simply cannot afford to leave the home. Children are witnessing this or being neglected because the alternative is complete destitution.
- Families are staying in homes which are completely unfit for purpose (mouldy, damp or unheated), as they do not want to risk being evicted if they complain to landlords or have nowhere else to go. As a result, children are developing illnesses such as chest infections or asthma.
- And, **above all other themes**, severe and dangerous changes to habits, choices and outcomes related to **food, gas and electricity**, which are explored in the next section.

1.2 'Heating, eating or having a home?'

It is almost impossible to capture the devastating challenge of high food, gas and electricity prices for families living in poverty. The phrase 'heating or eating', commonly used in reporting around poverty, no longer adequately describes the choices that families are making. This is because many households can afford to do neither. A better approximation is families making a choice between heating and eating **or** keeping a roof over their heads.

Families are under huge financial stress; we are referring more and more to foodbanks for support. They are reluctant to heat their homes, which exacerbates issues such as mould and physical illness.

Families are living in constant crisis and worry about bills and food. Most have not been able to put heating on during the winter months. There has also been an increase in depression and anxiety in adults and parents.

At times there is no more budgeting the family can physically do as they do not have enough to meet basic needs.

Most on Universal Credit can't afford food, rent and utilities, let alone clothes, travel and having a life outside of the home.

It has resulted in them having to prioritise whether to buy food, or keep their roof over their head, and their quality of life has decreased significantly.

Food scarcity, high grocery prices, and inadequate nourishment permeated responses from frontline workers. There is a tangible fear for children going without enough food to grow, sustain basic health and avoid malnourishment. Frontline workers gave many examples where adults in the home, already having skipped meals for themselves, were being forced to do the same to their children. One young person had fainted and was hospitalised after being unable to afford to eat for four days. Many families are experiencing physical and mental illness as a result of chronic hunger. As a result, frontline workers - regardless of their intended role – are increasingly having to seek food parcels and food bank support for families in desperate need.

I recently delivered a food parcel to a family of 4 children. Within minutes, the children were rummaging through the bags and actually opened a tin of beans and started to eat them cold from the tin. It was heart-breaking to see.

They are going without basic needs and going to school without breakfast and snacks. Most of the times the only meal they are having is in school grounds.

Children are not receiving healthy meals and it's affecting them developmentally. Children are struggling at school as it is affecting their behaviour.

They have gone without food some days, felt cold and contemplated ending their life.

The higher cost of gas and electricity has been a cause for huge concern (on average household energy bills increased by 54% in April 2022¹⁷). Families are unable to afford the electricity or water to wash clothing, nor the gas needed to heat the home to dry it. This was also reflected in families' ability to attend to personal hygiene. Feedback indicated that showering and bathing was becoming harder in light of the cost of using a boiler, let alone the cost of hygiene products. As with food scarcity, the lack of gas and electricity to power or heat the home is contributing to increasing physical and mental illness for adults and children.

Parents are scared to put heating on, even for an hour on the coldest days and nights. Children, and their parents are bathing less. Washing and drying clothes has become a major concern due to fuel costs. Childhood illness amongst our families have increased.

Their electric and gas had been off for over a week, so no heating, no washing, the family were huddled together on the living room floor to keep warm.

Children are often cold and cannot have hot baths, and little opportunity to have activities that help with well-being and self-esteem.

Hygiene patterns have changed as families can't afford baths, showers or to wash clothes. The gap between wealthy and deprived is greater and more obvious so children and families are being stigmatised and discriminated against as a result.

¹⁷ House of Commons Library briefing, April 2023

Section 2: Adverse Childhood Experiences and Wellbeing

Section 1 has illustrated some of the significant challenges that families living in poverty are facing due to the cost-of-living crisis. Section 2 explores these challenges through the lens of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and their impact on mental health. Table 4 explores the prevalence of households exhibiting ACEs, as reported by survey respondents.

Table 4. Prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences

Adverse Childhood Experience	% of families 2021	% of families 2022	% of families 2023	Difference 2022-23	Difference 2021-23
Mental illness in the family	63%	68%	70%	+2%	+7%
Parental separation	63%	67%	69%	+2%	+6%
Domestic violence	59%	63%	64%	+1%	+5%
Verbal abuse	61%	63%	65%	+2%	+4%
Neglect	48%	54%	55%	+1%	+7%
Parent / carer physical health problem / illness / disability	44%	49%	50%	+1%	+6%
Alcohol abuse in the family	39%	45%	45%	No change	+6%
Physical abuse	44%	45%	47%	+2%	+3%
Drug use in the family	37%	42%	42%	No change	+5%
Sexual abuse	22%	26%	27%	+1%	+5%
Imprisonment of family member	20%	23%	25%	+2%	+5%
Bereavement – <i>non-traditional ACE</i>	28%	31%	31%	No change	+3%

With mental illness reported as being present in 70% of this cohort and parental separation in 69%, as well as children in over half of households experiencing neglect and verbal abuse, this reflects the trends apparent in applications for Buttle UK grants. Across the survey, frontline workers attribute financial hardship as a significant factor in the worsening impact of these traumatic circumstances. This further amplifies the risks attached to the cost-of-living crisis.

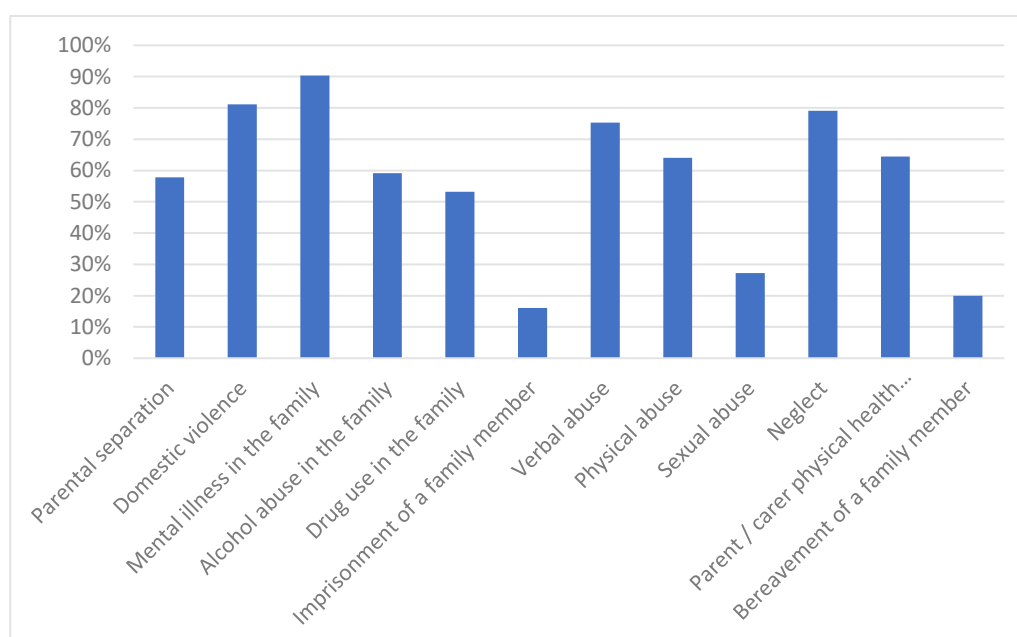
Another risk factor is the changing behaviours that frontline workers attribute to the cost-of-living crisis. An example is reports of parents staying with abusive partners because they have not got the financial means to move away. They report 64% of households as experiencing domestic violence. This is a worrying indicator of what victims and children are having to experience due to lacking the means to escape. It also draws parallels to the same issue caused by the COVID-19 restrictions, without the corresponding attention drawn at the time.

Frontline workers are also making it clear, elsewhere in the survey, that the cost-of-living crisis is increasing parental stress, anxiety and poor health. These factors are likely to

contribute to negative coping strategies such as substance abuse. For these families, alcohol abuse was reported in 45% of homes and drug use in 42%. There is a very real possibility that the current crisis is not just exacerbating existing ACEs, but may also contribute to new ones.

While the variations between 2022-2023 may be marginal, they largely reinforce a trend. We also asked support workers to rate the changing severity of these ACEs over the last year. The net changes modelled in Chart 2 indicate significant risks in the home, particularly in the worsening of domestic violence (+81%), neglect (+79%), verbal abuse (+75%) and physical abuse (+64%). Families are going through intolerable strain and are under immense pressure. It is unsurprising that, with a 90% net increase in severity, mental illness is the most commonly reported ACE.

Chart 2. Changing severity of ACEs as a result of the cost-of-living crisis



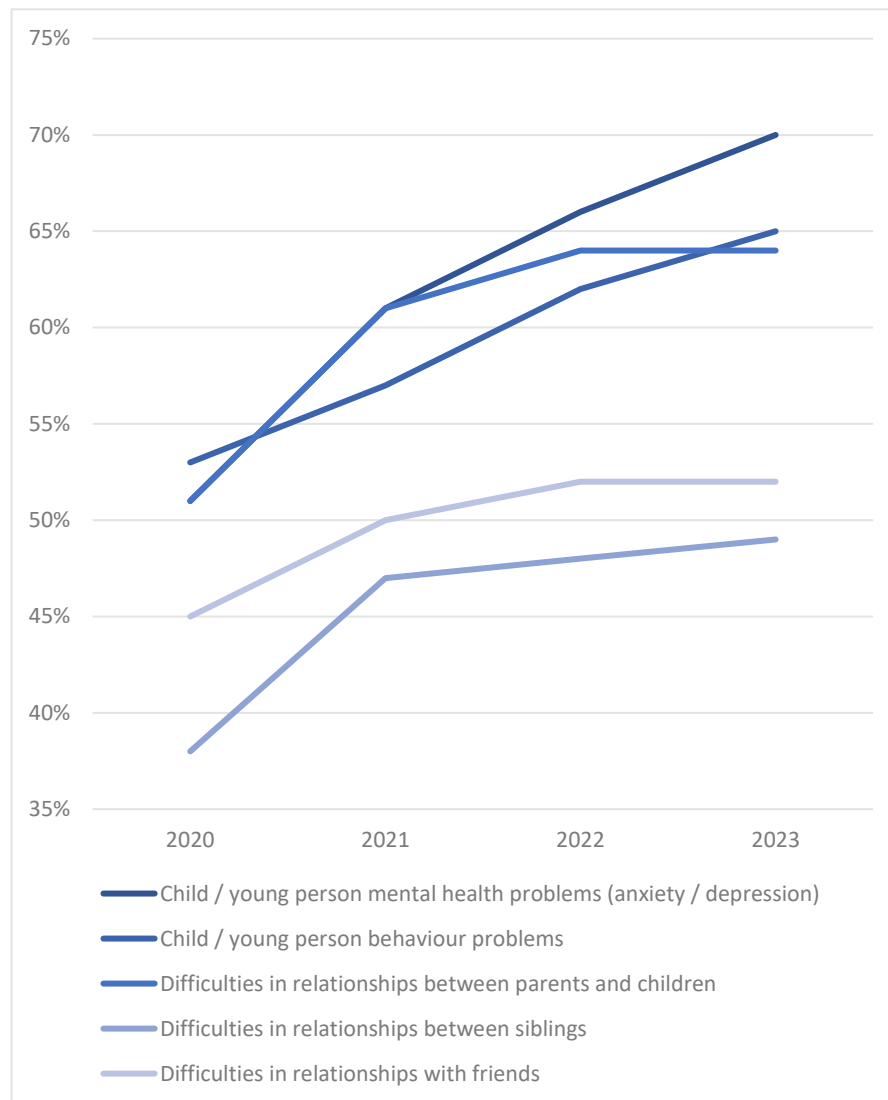
2.1 Mental Health

It is hugely important to understand the relationship between childhood poverty and the prevalence of poor mental health. Our previous State of Child Poverty reports have put mental illness at the centre of every crisis that is impacting on children's chances for healthy, successful life outcomes. We understand that mental illness is not necessarily an intrinsic part of life in poverty, but our findings have repeatedly found that where living standards are poor, mental health resources to cope are low. One of the ways we explore mental wellbeing is through asking frontline workers about not just children and young people's mental health, but their behaviour, relationships with family and friendships with peers. Chart 3 maps the responses to this question between 2020 and 2023.

As in previous findings, the single worst indicator for wellbeing was the staggering 70% of children and young people reported as suffering with mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression. The percentage that our respondents report working with has

mushroomed year-on-year, climbing 10% over the first year of the pandemic restrictions and a further 9% in the two following years. The trauma of poor mental health is significant, yet the basic tools needed to overcome these challenges are not available to many of the children and young children we support. We have already seen how many lack a safe place to sleep, enough nutrition to thrive, clean clothes and basic utilities in the home.

Chart 3. Tracking social and emotional difficulties due to poverty



A similar trend is noticeable for the prevalence of children and young people with behaviour problems, climbing from 53% in 2020 to 65% of children in 2023. This will have enduring impacts on their education and their capacity to engage with their learning. It is hugely concerning to see the number reported as having relationship problems with their parents/carers, who otherwise might be the lifeline in terms of support through these challenges. Even relationships with siblings and friends are under strain for around half of these families. These very vulnerable children and young people are increasingly isolated in times of unendurable pressure.

Support workers were quick to describe the brutal reality of poor wellbeing. Their qualitative responses told us:

- The difficulties that young people are facing now with their mental health are going unchecked into young adulthood. This is significantly lowering their life chances.
- Families feel a sense of complete abandonment in terms of the support available to children and young people. Long waiting lists leave them with escalating mental health crises that invade the home and their education; intervention comes too late.
- There is a pervasive sense of helplessness, instability and toxic stress. Children, and their families, feel out of control of their lives. They fall very quickly into cyclical bouts of depression or anxiety.
- The knock-on implications of watching parents and carers struggle with their mental health should not be underestimated. Children are growing up fast, witnessing untreated mental illness and dealing with the fallout, which then often perpetuates their own mental illness.
- Children and young people are isolated by the combination of their poor wellbeing and the resulting effect on relationships with family and friends. They are increasingly unable to communicate, interact, and join in with opportunities outside of the home.
- Many are suffering with poor self-esteem and lack confidence, the levels of which are stopping them from attending their education. Those that do attend are sometimes bullied for their ill-fitting or unwashed clothing, which further contributes to extremely poor self-worth.

Not having access to the basic requirements has a great impact on the families I support. Firstly the child's self worth and confidence reduces, their social skills are impacted on and following that, there are clear signs of impact to the child's learning abilities. The child becomes isolated into a world that has no joy or stimulation or purpose and creates an outlook on life as being negative. The children resort to merely surviving each day rather than living.

Children will get bullied at school if their family doesn't have the 'right stuff'. Children are worried about their day-to-day lives, they worry on behalf of their parents not being able to provide decent meals, heating, baths, never mind not having decent or adequate clothing. Young and younger children are being affected and this has a negative impact on their mental health and their behaviours.

The financial hardship experienced by my client group has been a huge contributing factor in their mental health deterioration, in addition to them forming a very poor condition of worth and low self-esteem issues...it has resulted in a mental health tsunami.

More and more referrals are being made to safeguard young babies and children, as parents are not able to afford to meet all of the costs it takes to live, which in turn breeds a lot of anxiety and mental health issues.

Many have low mood or poor mental health so their wellbeing is compromised, with increased hopelessness, self-harm, making poor choices that make matters worse...let alone the behavioural problems and even 'hanger'.

The impact is huge, they feel like giving up most of the time. It's hard to get on with their lives and start making [a] future [for] themselves when they are so weighed down and trying to survive from one day to the next.

Section 3: Education: Necessity or Luxury?

This year, support workers reported that **63%** of the children and young people they support were struggling to engage in their education. They also reported that **60%** were falling behind as a result of the high cost-of-living. In 2022, this was 51%. This increase, as well as the high number struggling with engagement, is indicative of a crisis for children and young people.

The crisis is that education serves two major purposes. Firstly, on a practical level, educational settings allow children a space to grow, learn, socialise, and have new experiences. Secondly, education is the gateway to a positive future. It offers chances to unlock wider opportunities, many of which become limited if they are not accessed through our primary and secondary education. Therefore, discourse around poverty and education is situated both in the lived impact today, and the potential impact tomorrow.

There were myriad responses from frontline workers that expressed their despair at the unfairness and lack of a future afforded to children living in poverty, describing the situation as irreversible. One quote stood out, as it so accurately summarised the pervasive sense of desperation that our frontline workers report:

*Families are having to prioritise basic needs because it is no longer a given that they will have a clean warm roof over the head and regular food to eat. **Education is becoming a luxury some families can no longer prioritise.***

3.4 Understanding the barriers to education

Chart 4. Poverty factors and the extent of their impact on education

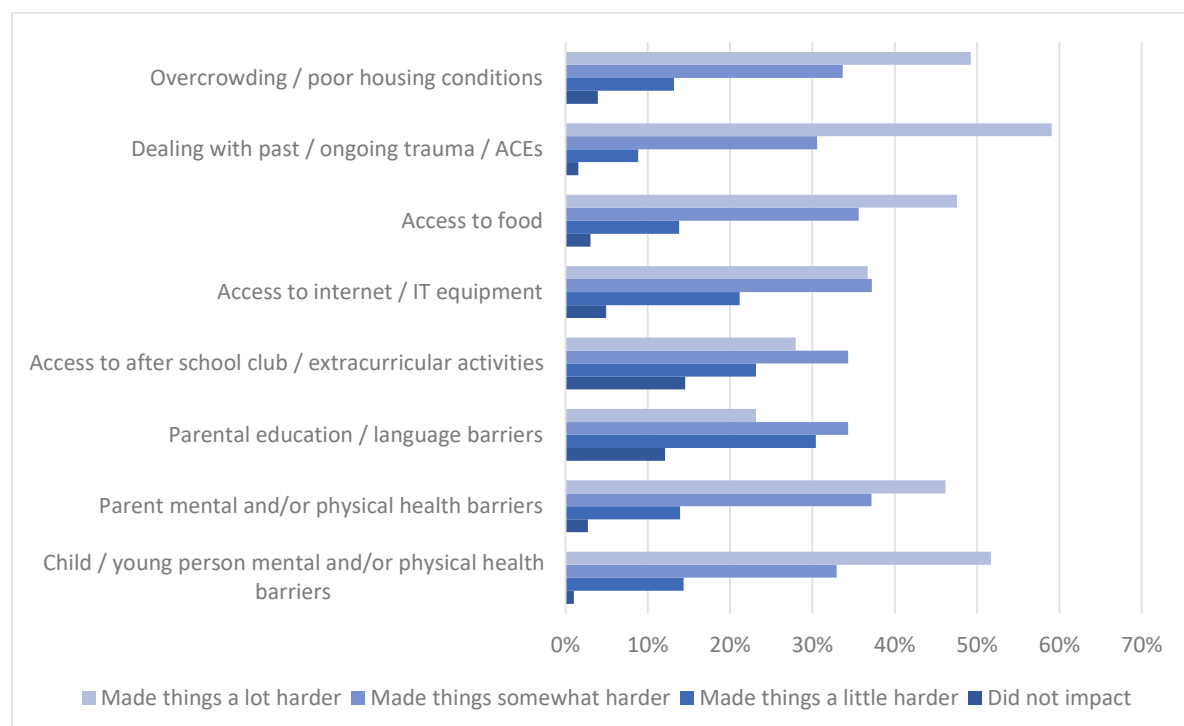


Table 4 demonstrates the impact of deep poverty on children's education. The majority of respondents felt that poverty and associated factors made things much harder in engaging in education.

Dealing with trauma, ACEs and mental or physical illness were seen as having a huge impact on education for 59% and 52% of children respectively. In their qualitative responses, frontline workers were very clear that a primary challenge is the poor service availability and extreme waiting lists for mental health support. Without this support, some young people are out of education for months or even years. Another major theme was the ongoing ripple effect of pandemic-related school closures on mental wellbeing, social development and friendships, factors which are coming to fruition today - and worsening.

The levels of stress and strain families are experiencing are very high, this is encouraging even higher levels of substance misuse, ill mental health, neglect and conflict. All of which children are witnessing and then worrying about, which is leading to them not being able to concentrate or even access education as before.

Due to the increase in poor mental health brought about by the cost-of-living crisis, young people are feeling more anxious and depressed and are lacking motivation to go into college. It is hard for them to prioritise or see hope for their future when they are paralysed by their current needs.

I have seen a big increase in children's mental health due to the stress on families with the cost-of-living. Children's attendance at school has dropped. Learning gaps have got bigger, especially with those in their final year at school.

There are not enough young people's services to cope with the demand for mental health/anxiety and behavioural issues, which means longer waiting lists. Children are then disadvantaged, their circumstances/issues increase and become more difficult to treat which can then impact on their school attendance, their behaviour at school and their academic abilities.

The mental health implications of the cost-of-living crisis is detrimental to our young children, they are facing worries about accessing food, having access to warmth, having clean clothes - things that children should never have to worry about is impacting them daily.

Respondents also talked about the critical impact on educational engagement of basic needs going unfulfilled. Access to food, or lack of, was reported as *making things a lot harder* in 48% of cases and making *things somewhat harder* for 36%. Likewise, overcrowding and poor housing conditions - particularly important in light of the significant challenges families are facing with heating and power - stood at 49% and 34% for the same descriptors. Children lack beds for the sleep they need; many do not have enough food to sustain learning behaviours or their wellbeing; some are cold, underdressed and dirty. None of these things create a positive environment for learning, a fact that frontline workers told us about repeatedly.

Children are going to school hungry, they are unable to concentrate or participate in classes. The hunger experienced by many children at home is causing difficulties in sleeping - creating a cycle of hungry and tired children going to school and not being able to engage. I have experiences of children stealing food from other children.

Children who are living in substandard housing where councils cannot afford to complete repairs are likely to suffer poor mental health, poor physical health and to have poorer outcomes at school. Children sleeping in cold damp homes who are eating poor quality food are not equipped to learn. Their expectations of life and their energy for dreams is sapped.

Children will refuse school if they are noted to be different, hungry, dirty, smelly, tired, no friends, struggle to maintain relationships, singled out, no support for mental health, struggle to get assessments or extra support needed to reach their potential.

Some of my young people have only had access to hot meals in school. Young people falling asleep due to cold at home, not sleeping and lack of food.

Frontline workers also highlighted a critical issue with the affordability of items that are essential to attend or access education. While this report has focused on the absolute basics that so many children are missing, such as food and clothing, it is not to say that the broader essentials are any less missed. IT equipment, sanitary/hygiene products, money for travel, school trips and school equipment are beyond the reach of many families. Lacking them creates even wider gaps in learning, attainment, self-worth, and social equity. Educational inequality is increasing, and in trying to level the playing field – and keep their children's future options intact - some families are selling belongings or simply going without.

Attendance will be negatively impacted due to access to/availability of clean appropriate clothing, lack of basic essentials such as shampoo/deodorant/sanitary products, poor attention span and increased irritability caused by hunger, poor mental health due to comparing self with peers who have better clothing/footwear/sportswear.

Refusal to go to school has increased 5-fold with cases and poverty, access to clothes, trainers, motivation due to decreased life opportunities and transport have affected children's education.

Rising travel costs, difficulties in being on time due to road closures/repairs, cold homes may impact on attendance at school, disrepair leading to health which may impact on attendance.

If children do not have access to internet and electronics, their education will suffer as now everything is online. I know families who have needed to sell an iPad for example to buy food and pay bills.

Some young people miss school during menstrual cycles due to not having sanitary products. Some families have sold possessions to help fund education needs.

Section 4: Support Services

No single individual or service can tackle the deep-rooted and complex issues described in this report. Many are systemic, environmental, or international crises, some of which will only lessen with much larger, national intervention. It is increasingly clear that for the individual households that our frontline workers are working with, the support services that they access are a lifeline. Families are turning to their local authorities, charities and social services for advice, financial assistance and emotional support, in droves.

However, our survey respondents' feedback is very clear - there simply isn't enough support to go around. Demand is outstripping resource. Table 5 demonstrates this. Critical services are required for between 60-70% of families. This is an increase of between 2-6% percentage points for each service since 2022. But service availability cannot keep up.

Table 5. Support service demand and availability in the last year

Type of service	% of families requiring support	Net change in service availability
Food banks	62%	29%
Counselling / therapy / other mental health support	68%	-40%
Local authority welfare assistance	64%	-6%
Support obtaining household items (e.g. white goods, furniture)	60%	-17%
Financial support for utility bills	65%	12%
Financial support for rent arrears	51%	-15%
Financial advice	64%	15%
Support finding accommodation	62%	-45%

The largest declines in service availability over the last year were in both mental health services and support finding accommodation. The former illuminates the extent of why children and young people are struggling to access their education or overcome ACEs. This is why waiting lists are growing, and gaps between referral and treatment are widening. As for the significant decline in support for finding accommodation, this is a ticking time bomb in light of the number of families at risk of eviction for rent arrears. If services are already overwhelmed, it is unlikely to improve as the impacts of the cost-of-living crisis surface.

Positive increases in availability were seen only for food banks, support for utility bills and financial advice. An increase in food bank availability is a telling reminder of the state of the crisis and the Trussell Trust have campaigned widely on this issue¹⁸. As for support with utility bills, it is likely that a 12% increase in availability will simply not keep up with demand, in addition to being time limited. Likewise, financial advice is not a replacement for tangible financial support in the form of grants or assistance. This is evidenced by financial support for rent and household goods seeing a net fall of 15% and 17% respectively. Families may need advice, but they also need practical and financial support.

¹⁸ [Trussell Trust](#)

Table 6. Exploring the most crucial support

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

Table 6 sets out the support our respondents feel is most needed going forward. Financial support for rent and bills remained the highest rated need for the second year running. The picture has shifted since 2022. While it may be a slight surprise to see the need for mental health support falling by 6%, the increase in need for food banks, accommodation and household items tells its own story. Families need their physiological needs met before they can even engage with their mental health needs. Qualitative responses to the 'Other' category suggest that no single service was likely to solve the issue. Many respondents simply could not pick one service over another.

As we saw in Section 2, support workers are seeing much higher numbers of families with ACEs in the home and increasing severity. They describe this as contributing to their workload and capacity to support, as well as increasingly requiring multi-agency cross-sector support at a time where they may be the only service available to that family. It is this elasticity that both gives credit to the exceptional work of frontline workers but also stretches them too thin to adequately support all the challenges they see. Many told us what these challenges mean for them on a day-to-day basis.

As workers we feel useless, we try and support and motivate and empower people, however most of our time is crisis management, so we only respond to emergencies...so the majority are being left without support and a service that they are entitled to. In my 40 years working in social/welfare role I have never known times that have been as bad as it is today. We are failing to help families, children of this generation do not stand a chance in life, it is so wrong that the families that we work with think that how they are living is normal and accept it.

As a government run statutory service, we also have not been given funding to help these families who are in crisis. We have seen a massive increase in neglect cases, families not being able to afford to feed their children and in turn a massive increase in parents suffering with their mental health. Of course this is not about staff but seeing this also has a massive impact on us - which in turn leads to staff sickness, families not getting the best service. The knock on effect is massive.

People are becoming less tolerant of the local authority and services. Due to the clients' high stress our jobs are being made more difficult and we are experiencing more and more stressful situations and a feeling of helplessness.

Support workers are spending a lot of time helping parents sort out grants / food banks / utilities reductions which is time taken out of the psycho-educative and therapeutic work. It sustains trauma; you move from an abusive household into a new place, but the single abused parent can't afford basics for survival.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Any study exploring themes of childhood deprivation is likely to produce humbling and difficult findings. The concept is not new to Buttle UK as this is the fifth time we have undertaken this study and the applications we receive on a daily basis include all the issues we summarise here. However, our 2023 survey has some of the most distressing responses we have ever received. This report speaks for over **200,000 children living in deep and persistent poverty**. We learnt that approximately **120,000 of these children live in destitution**.

Navigating the narrative that pulls these findings together is challenging because so many of the circumstances explored in this report – ACEs, food and utilities poverty, educational inequality, service availability, mental health crises – are intrinsically linked. We know that the cost-of-living crisis is a significant driver of the increasing problems families are facing and that far too many households are going without the basics they need. This year we learnt the extent to which this includes food, gas and electricity. Many of the families described in this report will not see their issues solved when inflation eventually levels off. The stress, anxiety, and health problems it has caused will last for a lot longer, as well as the accumulated debt and trauma.

The ACEs that children and young people are going through are increasing both in number and in severity. These are the most telling indicators of how much the current financial climate is permeating their childhood. Research tells us two important things: firstly, that the experience of childhood poverty has a significant, negative impact on long-term life chances¹⁹. Secondly, that experiencing ACEs hinders appropriate development, damages relationship building skills, and increases toxic lifelong stress²⁰. This report shows that the problems and challenges we are witnessing for children and young people today will contribute to a different, growing crisis tomorrow.

This holds true for our findings on education. We have evidence from frontline workers of poor engagement, low attainment, bullying, behaviour problems and extreme hunger in the classroom. If we acknowledge that the expectation of children being fed, washed, and kept warm is not even being met for many, how are they expected to engage with their education at all? Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs indicates that physiological needs are the foundation from which safety, belonging and esteem grows. Trying to build a future, through education, on top of this shaky foundation is not working.

While we are proud to present data which will add to an important body of research around the state of child poverty today, describing childhood poverty through the lens of numbers and figures simply does not capture the whole picture. The quotes in this report from those on the frontline hold up a devastating mirror to the issues. It is not possible to include the many hundreds of quotes we received, but their overall message was clear: the situation is untenable.

As a result of these findings, Buttle UK has two main calls for action. The evidence presented here around the inaccessibility of food and utilities for low-income families demonstrates a clear need for more, and enduring, financial support directly for these

¹⁹ [What are the effects of child poverty? | Children's Society](#)

²⁰ [Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences | CDC](#)

basics. The Cost-of-Living Payments afforded to families on Universal Credit and other DWP benefits are not enough to plug the gap between household income and outgoings. They are also intermittent and time-limited. Therefore, we suggest the following:

- We 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 scrapped²¹. In conjunction with this, we support the National Education Union's No Child Left Behind campaign, which makes similar calls for specific support for children facing educational inequality due to poverty²².
- Universal Credit payments are not adequate to cover the costs that families are facing. The 10.1% uplift in April 2023 reflected inflation, but this report and other studies demonstrate that families on low incomes are disproportionately affected by inflation. While every household received a £400 payment towards their energy bills across 2022-23 through the Energy Bill Support Scheme, research also shows that low-income households are three times more exposed to rising energy costs compared to highest-income households²³. Therefore, we stand with the Trussell Trust and JRF's call for an Essentials Guarantee. This proposes an independent process to regularly determine an 'essentials guarantee level', based on the cost of essentials (such as food, utilities and vital household goods) for the adults in a household (excluding rent and council tax) that Universal Credit's standard allowance must at least meet after any deductions²⁴.
- We stand by our call for a dedicated Cabinet Minister for Children and Young People²⁵ to realise a England-wide Child Poverty Strategy, following in the example of Scotland and Wales, where action is beginning to take place. This role should begin with a thorough review of the adequacy of current state support for children and young people living in poverty, in order to better understand the relationship between poverty, inequality and lifelong impacts in our society today.

Our report shows that the frightening fall in household living standards has rippling impacts on mental health, education and access to opportunities that should be afforded to all children and young people. In light of these circumstances, we urge changes to our education institutions, local authorities and health services. These are:

- We stand with the major campaigns being led by Mind, including the campaign for mentally ill individuals living in poverty to have a robust package of benefits to help them through the crisis²⁶, and their campaign for children and young people's mental health services to be fully funded and more accessible²⁷.
- Buttle UK supports calls to make access to mental health support for children easier, whether that is through making Mental Health Support Teams available in all schools, or the proposal by Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition for community based Early Support Hubs²⁸.

²¹ [Child Poverty Action Group | All Kids Count Campaign](#)

²² [NEU | No Child Left Behind Campaign](#)

²³ [Institute for Fiscal Studies | Cost of Living Crisis](#)

²⁴ [Joseph Rowntree Foundation | Essentials Guarantee](#)

²⁵ [Children's Alliance | Press Release September 2022](#)

²⁶ [Mind | Benefits Campaign](#)

²⁷ [Mind | Children and Young People's Mental Health Campaign](#)

²⁸ [Children and Young People's Mental Health Coalition | Fund the Hubs](#)

We recognise that, in making recommendations to others, Buttle UK has a responsibility to ensure its own work reflects the findings of this report too. We will continue to advocate for children and young people living in increasingly challenging home circumstances and facing the impacts of overstretched service provision by examining our grant-making internally. Specifically, we will review the items and experiences we provide, and consider those which are best placed to address the current context that our grantees are living through.

Representation is so important. We are grateful to have reached more frontline workers than ever, but Buttle UK knows that offering a space for the voices of those living in poverty is essential. We intend to follow up these findings directly with grantees themselves. In 2023, we will be undertaking research with parents and carers about their experience of the cost-of-living crisis and their experience of receiving a Buttle UK grant.



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