

Pandemic and Tory government measures having brutal impact on London's disadvantaged young people

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The Childhood Trust report, “Children in Lockdown—The Consequences of the Coronavirus Crisis for Children Living in Poverty,” exposes the disproportionate impact of the pandemic and government policies on disadvantaged children and youth in London.

The authors engaged directly with children and families living in poverty. They note, “Families who were already enduring hard, challenging lives have had to survive lockdown in the most appalling circumstances. For children in poverty, the crisis has multiplied the impact of the adversities they endure such as hunger, fear, isolation and stigma.”

Between 2010/2011 and 2017/2018, funding for local authority services for children fell by £3 billion. During this decade of austerity, “a network of charities, community organisations and volunteers are now often the only means of support available for disadvantaged children.” The COVID-19 pandemic has placed these already hopelessly inadequate organisations under existential threat.

The report is divided into six sections, uncovering different aspects of the social crisis for the capital's youth that have been exacerbated during the pandemic. London, as a highly socially polarised conurbation, shares these features with urban centres around the UK and internationally.

Childhood hunger during the pandemic is addressed in the section *Hunger and Food Insecurity*, which states: “Research suggests that around 2 million children have now directly experienced hunger since March 23, beyond the 1.3 million children that are entitled to free school meals before the start of the pandemic.”

The lack of adequate governmental provision during the closure of schools has led to an increase of food deprivation. “For many disadvantaged children and young

adults, the free meal they could receive at school was their only hot meal of the day. Without access to this, they are facing hunger and malnutrition. Moreover, families dealing with unemployment as a result of the coronavirus recession are struggling to make up for this loss.”

Popular opposition forced the government to extend the free school meals scheme through the summer, lifting the threat of malnutrition hanging over the heads of 1.3 million children. The report, however, criticises the government voucher system, which was supposed to replace school meals following school closures, as being “slow and flawed.” Also cited is a recent Human Rights Watch statement calling the UK government's approach a violation of children and young adults' right to food.

Under the section “Homelessness and Temporary Housing Risks,” the study states that homelessness among youth is often hidden, “as they are less likely to be ‘rough sleepers’ but still experience shelter insecurity. They are more likely to be staying with friends or family, in shelters, bed and breakfast lodging, or sofa-surfing.” This instability puts them more at risk as it is difficult to socially distance, “making these children and young adults more susceptible to the virus, especially for those who have diabetes, asthma, epilepsy, anxiety and/or depression.”

A recent study that appeared in the *Lancet*, “Impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable children in temporary accommodation in the UK,” highlighted problems facing families living in temporary housing as a result of the pandemic and the government response to it. These include:

- Overcrowding due to limited space, shared kitchens, and toilet facilities, making self-isolation impossible.
- Children often have inadequate space to crawl or play and no access to fresh air.

- No face-to-face contact with general practitioners and health services, including health visitors.

- Handwashing and hygiene are problematic due to minimal access to soap, water, disinfectants, and bathrooms.

The section “Emotional and Physical Abuse” details how lockdown conditions of youngsters forced to spend much of their time indoors, often in cramped conditions, have increased “the opportunity for them to witness domestic abuse and/or endure emotional or physical abuse at the hands of their family members.”

Dealing with “Mental Health Concerns,” the report found that the COVID-19 crisis was having “a significant impact on the mental health of children and young people. They are worried about contracting the virus, spreading it to their family members, and losing loved ones.”

The report cites a survey conducted in the first week of the UK lockdown by mental health charity Young Minds regarding the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of children and their ability to access support: “The most pressing areas of concern for children and young adults was relating to worries about their family’s health, the closure of schools, a loss of routine, a loss of social connection and anxieties about their future.” Loneliness and mental health problems can predict “future mental health problems up to 9 years later,” it noted.

Also cited are the “COVID-19 Social Studies” conducted by University College London each week of lockdown to measure young people’s “social and psychological experiences during the pandemic.” Over 60,000 participated in the studies and the findings for 18- to 29-year-olds included:

- 2 out of 3 are worried about a future recession.
- 1 out of 2 are worried about unemployment levels rising.
- Only 7 percent feel fully in control of their future plans.

The section on “Educational Learning Loss” notes that “the educational attainment gap defined by class and economic status was already a significant challenge before coronavirus.” Citing research by the Education Endowment Foundation, the study confirmed that children and young people who are eligible for free school meals are consistently falling behind their counterparts. The attainment level gap often begins—or is accelerated—on entry to school at age 5 years, and this gap “grows wider at every following stage of education.”

These findings underline the significantly lower educational outcomes of young carers, who tend to have

higher rates of absenteeism, lower grades and an inability to gain employment.

Speaking directly to the educational experience of most young people during lockdown, the report states that “students from disadvantaged backgrounds have significantly fewer—if any—resources including limited access to technology and internet connection, restricted supervision or guidance over educational activities, and an unstable working environment.”

Referring to a recent report from The Sutton Trust, which examined discrepancies related to the transition to “online learning,” it found that “pupils from middle class homes were much more likely to participate in online lessons (30 percent), compared to working class pupils (16 percent). In private schools, 51 percent of primary and 57 percent of secondary students were able to access online lessons every day, more than twice as likely as their counterparts in state schools.”

While almost half of middle-class parents reported confidence in supporting their children with their schooling during lockdown, only 37 percent of working-class parents did so.

As a result of the policies of the present and previous governments, “between the years of 2010 and 2020, there have been significant cuts to public spending, especially in areas where the need is highest and conditions are generally worse.”

Ultimately, the report is an appeal to the very government and corporations responsible for the increased suffering, before and during the lockdown, of not just the London’s youth but throughout the UK. The Childhood Trust funds a network of more than 200 child poverty charities in London. Its stated intention is to raise money from “London’s corporate sector, trusts, philanthropists and other donors.”



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