

POVERTY UNDER LOCKDOWN

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Artwork above by Caroline Cugnet

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As we agonise over this pandemic, many of us hope that when the threat is past we can move toward a more compassionate society where no one is left behind. And yet, people in poverty are, once again, falling through the cracks.

Loss of income and benefits

Plans to protect people from income loss due to Covid-19 haven't helped those who were paid under the table and can't prove lost income. Tracey Herrington, manager of Thrive Teesside in Stockton-on-Tees, observes:

- "Many people do not get paid through the books. It is all cash-in-hand. As some have partners who have some income, they will not be eligible for benefits. This cash-in-hand has kept them afloat, so now they will fall into very difficult circumstances."

Compounding the loss of income, tight budgets go out the window when the cheapest staple foods are the ones out of stock and the only groceries available tend to be more expensive.

Tracey adds that many people with disabilities or long-term health conditions have pending assessments or tribunal dates to evaluate whether they qualify for the Personal Independence Payment or Employment Support Allowance. Evaluations have now ground to a halt, leaving people feeling “very low and unsure whether they will receive their entitlements”.

The [APLE \(Addressing Poverty with Lived Experience\) Collective](#) says:

“Activists across the country are describing situations where people already trapped in rolling waves of poverty are drowning, self-isolating and unable to afford food or medication”.

It is not right that the most vulnerable people bear the brunt of this upheaval.

Children in care

Another impact of this crisis concerns contact visits between birth parents and their looked-after children in long-term foster care. [Prof. Paul Bywaters has demonstrated](#) “strong evidence of welfare inequalities in children’s social care services [...] according to indicators of social disadvantage”.

In other words, it is most often families in poverty whose children have been removed into care due to confusion between neglect, inequality and poverty. [The Guardian reports](#) that since the pandemic began, there has been a rise in child protection proceedings.

For the moment, there are no Covid-19 regulations specific to fostering. In some places, the centres used for contact visits have been closed down. Although public health concerns must come first, this is a particularly excruciating time for both children and parents to have to miss in-person visits. The [Nuffield Family Justice Observatory](#) is concerned that “there may be pressure to stop contact – even digital contact – altogether, because social workers and others are so stretched dealing with other issues”.

At ATD Fourth World and the Parents, Families and Allies Network, we have seen birth parents whose contact visits were cancelled. One parent described her interaction with social services as making her feel “boxed in and degraded”.

Thankfully, in some cases these are beginning to be replaced by Skype video calls. But we must ask why such calls have so rarely been allowed before? Draconian policies limit many birth parents to a single monthly visit, with no possibility of telephone or video

contact in between, even on birthdays.

[In the United States](#) due to Covid-19, “many jurisdictions around the country have suspended all in-person visits between parents and children in foster care indefinitely”. And yet New York City, despite being beleaguered with particularly high rates of infection, has issued guidelines “that recognise the potential for permanent psychological harm if children are unable to see their parents and siblings, especially during a time of crisis, and call for continued in-person visits in lower risk cases”.

Forgotten about

Here, we are deeply worried that people in poverty, including parents of children being monitored by children’s social care, are being forgotten about. It is only on the ground that it is possible to measure the full impact of Covid-19 and to understand whether policies intended to mitigate the effects are actually reaching their intended beneficiaries. **Expertise by experience is essential to getting the response right.**

Now more than ever, all of us need public services and systems to provide a strong safety net. Although these are uncharted waters, Britain can rise to the challenge—by urging professional policymakers to draw on the knowledge of people in deep poverty about how they are experiencing this pandemic, and their thoughts about how solutions can work for people in their situations.

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