'COVID-19 and low-income families: Researching together’

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Learning Lessons from a Year Like No Other: Recommendations for a (Post)Pandemic Future
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Covid Realities
Families on low incomes during the pandemic
Why research together?

• Growing evidence of the **adverse impacts** in our substantive area - families on a low-income - was clear.

• It was vital that we **continued to document and understand lived experiences of families living through poverty during the pandemic**, while also increasing the policy reach and potential impact of the resultant data through processes of synthesis.

• Therefore, an underpinning belief of our collective is that we can **make the clearest impact on behalf of families by working together**.

• Our collaboration is rooted in a commitment to **thinking sensitively** about how we adapt our research to the new pandemic context;

• This includes seeking to reduce additional burdens on people taking part in research; ensuring research efforts aren’t needlessly duplicated; and seeking to maximise the policy impact of our **collective and emergent evidence base**;

• The project is foregrounding **collaboration over competition** or incidental co-operation over research, which can be unusual in academic research and the ‘publish or perish’ culture.
Our approach

- **14 projects** working with **over 4,000 parents and carers across the UK**;
- Meet monthly as a Special Interest Group, also individually
- **Principles** – early on in the process, as a group we developed a core set of values that underpin our collaborative work
- **Thematic mapping** – developed a set of research questions to apply to the projects
- **Support** – ideas sharing workshop around digital technologies and remote interviewing; writing retreats; solidarity
Thematic mapping

• Conceptual mapping exercise which was informed by the following questions:

  o Who are the parents and carers your project is working with? E.g. number of children; gender; ethnicity; employment; social security; etc

  o What are the key issues facing parents and carers on a low income during COVID-19?

  o What one policy change would make a difference to the lives of parents and carers living on a low income?
Secondary data analysis
Key findings

• Increased **precarity** for families on a low income

• **Mental health** and isolation

• Importance of/lack of **support networks**
Increased precarity for families on a low income

• Families on a low income who were already experiencing financial insecurity were less well prepared to cope with the pandemic (Bringing up a Family and Making Ends Meet; Covid Realities)

• Disrupted budgeting practices (Welfare at a Social Distance; Covid Realities)

• Uneven impacts on labour market (A Tale of Two Cities; Get Heard Scotland; Caring Without Sharing)

• Gendered impacts of: work, care, homeschooling (Born in Bradford; Caring Without Sharing; Couples Balancing Work, Money and Care)
Mental health and isolation

• Lockdown measures and restrictions generally had greater negative effect on mental health amongst families already on low incomes / people already experiencing hardship and inequalities (Born in Bradford; Covid Realities)

• Fears about contracting Covid-19 and the possible health implications of that. Heightened concerns amongst some participants from minoritized ethnic backgrounds (Covid Realities)

• Isolation leading to mental ill health – especially for single parents (Caring Without Sharing; Benefits Changes and Larger Families; Covid Realities)

• Fears about £20 UC cut (prior to October 2021) caused anxiety about making ends meet on even less (Couples Balancing Work Money and Care)

• Some families reported improved mental health – spending time with family (Following Young Fathers Further; Born in Bradford; Benefits Changes and Larger Families)
Importance of/lack of support networks

- Even while informal support networks were harder to access at the height of the pandemic, they remained essential for many (UC in Salford; Covid Realities; Benefit Changes and Larger Families)

- Parents who lived apart from their children sometimes struggled to see them (Following Young Fathers Further)

- Formal support services moving online worked for some people and not for others (Forces in Mind; Get Heard Scotland; Following Young Fathers Further)

- Role of research projects in providing online community (UC:Us; Covid Realities; Commission on Social Security)
Find out more:

• Researcher Resources
  https://covidrealities.org/research/resources

• Joint blog on our approach:
“Something needs to change. We cannot continue to pretend that being in work means not being in poverty.”

Mel, Covid Realities participant

“We’re asking for a fundamental change in the way we are seen and treated within the system. We want to be respected enough to not have to prove ourselves at every single turn.”

Catherine, Covid Realities participant, extract from speech at parliamentary event, March 2021

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