

COVID and the cost of living crisis are set to collide this winter—the fallout will be greatest for the most vulnerable

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The cost of living crisis is [affecting people](#) around the world. Although it's been building for some time, the fact that this crisis comes hot on the

heels of an [ongoing pandemic](#) only makes matters worse.

It's not surprising, though still worth highlighting, that the cost of living crisis won't [be felt equally](#) across society. For example, the toll will be greater for people living in more deprived areas, those on lower incomes, [older adults](#), single-parent families, people with disabilities and those from minority ethnic backgrounds.

People from these groups are already more likely to have had to [reduce their gas and electricity use](#), to struggle to [pay their bills](#) and to face [fuel poverty](#).

We also know that COVID-19, although challenging for everyone, is an [unequal pandemic](#). People from minority [ethnic groups](#), from the most deprived neighbourhoods, [older people](#) and those with underlying [health conditions](#) have been [at higher risk](#) of death or serious illness from COVID.

This will be the first winter since the [pandemic](#) began where many countries have removed all non-pharmaceutical protections, including [face masks](#), testing, social distancing and self-isolation. After two-and-a-half years of uncertainty, what we're about to experience is, again, [unprecedented](#).

Unless we learn from past missteps, both in government responses to [economic crises](#) and the pandemic, these two crises will collide to make for a devastating winter, especially for the most vulnerable.

Some examples

If people are struggling to pay their bills, how can they be expected to buy COVID tests? Or to stay home from work when they have COVID symptoms, if they'll lose out on their wages?

Governments and councils [in the UK](#) are already [setting up](#) "warm banks", which are public spots, such as places of worship or [community centres](#), that people can go to if their homes are too cold. There are a number of [concerns over warm banks](#), not least that they treat the symptom rather than the cause of the problem.

However, we know that COVID [spreads easily indoors](#), especially where large numbers of people are mixing for extended periods. So another concern is that warm banks might increase the spread of COVID among those who are both most vulnerable to the effects of the virus, and most in need of somewhere warm.

Many people will have already been under increased [financial strain](#) during the pandemic as a result of lost or lower income, making them [more vulnerable](#) to the cost of living crisis.

Research has found a link between recession and lifestyle-related health risk factors, such as [poor diet](#) and obesity, particularly for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. We know obesity is a [significant risk factor](#) for getting very sick and dying from COVID.

Indeed, past experience tells us that economic crises can be devastating to the health of the [most vulnerable](#). Austerity measures implemented in Europe following the 2008 recession saw cuts to public spending, including social protections, education and health. This coincided with an [overall widening](#) of health inequalities in the decade from 2010.

So as many countries hurtle towards [another recession](#), how can we learn from the pandemic, and the last recession, to better weather these twin crises?

Shared responsibility

I am a social scientist with expertise in public health, and I've been leading research looking at [public experiences](#) during the COVID pandemic. Over the course of the pandemic, I have argued that [too much responsibility](#) was put in the hands of the public. The long-term solution to reducing the impacts of infectious respiratory diseases is less about [washing hands](#) and more about ensuring public buildings and transport have [adequate ventilation](#) (although clean hands help too).

Similarly, the long-term solution to the cost of living crisis is less about suggesting people [buy new kettles](#), and more about building [warmer houses](#)—and making them more affordable for all.

There are of course ways that we, as individuals, can help ourselves and each other. Earlier in the pandemic, we saw how communities came together to [support one another](#). A large number of [grassroots groups](#), often organised via Facebook or WhatsApp, worked to provide food and other essentials to people who were self-isolating or after they had lost their jobs, for example.

It's encouraging that [a portion](#) of these mutual aid groups are still active, and have pivoted to helping people cope with the cost of living crisis.

But ultimate responsibility lies with governments and society at large.

The solutions are complex

In the immediate term, we need to be strengthening rather than cutting funding and policies that protect public health. In the UK for example, there are concerning signs that the new cabinet is looking to undo hard-fought [public health measures](#) designed to reduce obesity.

Energy price caps can help to alleviate the crisis somewhat, but don't go far enough. As Michael Marmot, an epidemiologist at University College

London, [argues](#), now is the time to deal with the longer-term problems that underpin fuel poverty.

Universal [basic income](#) has been put forward as [one possible solution](#) to the inequalities [exacerbated by the pandemic](#). But what about, as some have proposed, [universal basic energy](#), where each household has a portion of its energy paid for by the government?

One approach which might guide us moving forward is [proportionate universalism](#), where those most in need are given the most support. Energy price caps fail to achieve this on their own.

Payments [for the most vulnerable](#) are a start, but, as [we learned](#) from financial support for COVID self-isolation, it's not just about making money available, but making it quick and easy to apply for and access.

As with the pandemic, although we will all be affected by the cost of living crisis this winter, for the most vulnerable, it might be more fitting to call it a "cost of surviving" [crisis](#).

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