

How words matter when facing the problem of children in care

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New research from the Institute of Population Health at the University of Liverpool calls for unflinching conversations about what poverty and

financial stress can do to families, and the impact on children's risk of entering care.

Dr. Davara Bennett led the study, which has identified a reluctance within Local Authority (LA) Children's Services to foreground the pressing problem of poverty. Despite clear evidence of a causal relationship between rising [child poverty](#) and children entering care, the study finds that policymakers used ambiguous language to describe the relationship—ambiguity that could prevent a meaningful consideration of anti-poverty policies.

The study is [published](#) in the journal *Children and Youth Services Review*.

In England, of the children born between 1992 and 1994, one in 30 experienced out-of-[home care](#) at some point during their childhood. The number of children in local authority care on 31 March has increased, year on year, for fifteen consecutive years. Poverty plays a huge part, and children in the most deprived 10% of neighborhoods are over 10 times more likely to enter the care system than those from the least deprived. Significantly, the rise in child poverty between 2015 and 2020 has led to over 10,000 additional [children](#) entering care.

To carry out this study, researchers conducted interviews with 15 policymakers among six local authority Children's Services departments in England. Through recording and analyzing responses, they identified common themes among participants.

Weaving together direct quotes and analysis, they illustrate policymakers' hesitation and caution in broaching the connections between poverty and care. Participants raised the problem of poverty in relation to care entry, but never in plain causal terms. Significantly, they framed deprivation as a powerful but static force, disconnected from the often rapidly changing socioeconomic conditions of families' lives—so

downplaying the potential for change.

Researchers suggest speaking plainly. They propose a causal framing that taps into our intuitive understanding of the damage that [financial stress](#) can do. This, they argue, may help pave the way for more productive and non-stigmatizing conversations about root problems and meaningful solutions.

Dr. Bennett said, "Our paper identified a number of similarities in how [policymakers](#) frame the problem of rising poverty—all of which, we suggest, stand in the way of implementing positive and effective change. We are calling for unflinching conversations about what poverty and financial stress can do to families—and the knock-on effects on overstretched, underfunded services. This could pave the way for appropriate and effective anti-poverty policy at a local level and beyond."

More information: Davara L. Bennett et al, Poverty and children entering care in England: A qualitative study of local authority policymakers' perspectives of challenges in Children's Services, *Children and Youth Services Review* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chilyouth.2024.107689](#)

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