New research finds families on low incomes face constant struggle to get by

22 March 2022

Going without food and heating has become a routine part of daily life for families on low incomes, according to the latest findings from the COVID Realities project.

Researchers say families on low-incomes are facing the fallout from the disruptions triggered by COVID-19, climate change, Brexit and now the war in Ukraine as the price of essential goods and services rise sharply.

COVID Realities was launched in April 2020 to document the experiences of parents and carers living on low-incomes during the pandemic.

The project, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, was due to end in December 2021, but has now been extended to capture the scale of the emerging cost of living crisis on everyday life on a low-income.

The findings from this additional work, which ran from November 2021 to March 2022, involved online diaries, responses to video elicited questions and online discussion groups. Parents and carers themselves developed recommendations of what needs to change, and why.

Pressing need

Dr. Ruth Patrick, who leads the research program from the University of York's Social Policy & Social Work said: "As winter 2021 loomed, we knew that the combination of the £20 cut to Universal Credit and the growing cost of living crisis would make daily life only harder still for families struggling on a low-income.

"Even so, the evidence generated from this research is a damning indictment of the extent and nature of hardship that families on a low-income routinely face.

"Families have nowhere else left to cut, and there is a pressing need for the UK Government to improve the social security system so it supports families and guarantees them a decent level of income."

Spring statement

In advance of the Spring Statement, parents and carers on a low-income are calling for urgent reform to social security.

The key findings are:

- There is nothing left to cut back—people have reached the limits of their budgeting practices and resourcefulness
- Going without essentials—without food and heating—has become a routine part of daily life for families on a low-income
- Life on a low income is having a negative impact on mental and physical health
- There is a need for significant changes to social security to address the problems of inadequate incomes.

Dr. Jim Kaufman, lead author of this report, said:
"These findings underscore the need for urgent action to ameliorate the hardships faced by people living on the lowest incomes.

"But they also point to more long-standing problems in the way our social security system and labor market are organized. These problems are no less deserving of our attention, and it is vital that our conversations about how to address them include the voices of people with lived experience."

**Changes**

While the measures announced so far by the Chancellor are welcome, families on a low-income describe them as short-term, narrowly targeted at energy costs, and failing to address the root causes of the problem.

Instead, they are calling for permanent, radical changes that directly address the problem of inadequate incomes, including:

- Increase the value of benefits in line with the rising cost of living (i.e. more than seven percent)
- Double child benefit
- Increase wages by bringing the minimum wage up to the real living wage
- Remove VAT from energy bills
- Reduce energy costs by reforming energy companies creating a fairer system
- Subsidize bills through a windfall tax on energy company profits
- Extend the warm homes discount
- Provide an emergency one-off payment of £200

**More information:** Every day is a struggle: Life at the sharp end of the cost-of-living crisis: covidrealities.org/learnings/w ... ps/everyday-struggle

Provided by University of York

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