

---

# COVID REALITIES: DOCUMENTING EVERYDAY FAMILY LIFE ON A LOW- INCOME DURING THE PANDEMIC

Dr Ruth Patrick [ruth.Patrick@york.ac.uk](mailto:ruth.Patrick@york.ac.uk) /  
[@ruthpatrick0](https://www.instagram.com/ruthpatrick0)

Drawing on collaborative work with parents and  
carers, Dr Maddy Power, Dr Kayleigh  
Garthwaite, Dr Geoff Page & Dr Katie Pybus



---

# WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO DOCUMENT LIFE ON A LOW-INCOME DURING THE PANDEMIC?

- Unpicking the ‘all in it together’ (v2) rhetoric
  - Facilitating a wider range of voices in policy discussions about post-covid futures
  - Directly drawing on and working with (and alongside) the expertise that comes from experience
-

---

# SOCIAL SECURITY IN THE PANDEMIC: THE ENDURANCE OF A VERY OLD RHETORIC\*

- I. Social welfare as inherently problematic (even negative)
- II. The deficient agency of social welfare claimants
- III. Welfare dependency aligned with passivity and inactivity
- IV. Divisions drawn – implicitly and explicitly – between deserving and undeserving populations
- V. Work as the route out of poverty (and linked ignoring of the reality of in-work welfare support)

\* See Patrick & Reeves (2020) for more on this, [here](#)

---

---

# INTRODUCING THE COVID REALITIES RESEARCH PROGRAMME

- Participatory, online research with over 100 parents and carers living on a low-income in the UK
  - Underpinned by an ethics of care and reciprocity
  - Programme also includes:
    - a) Synthesis of research findings across 15 projects
    - b) Tracking of social security response through Child Poverty Action Group's Early Warning System
    - c) 'Holding space' for researchers to think through how to work ethically and appropriately in a new and fast changing context
    - d) Economic modelling of policy changes and their likely impact on poverty (and poverty depth)
-

---

# THE EVERYDAY REALITIES OF LIFE ON A LOW- INCOME IN THE PANDEMIC

---

---

# RISING COSTS\*

- **I've already seen my food bill rise due to Covid**, with shortages and having to buy more expensive brands. I'm dreading what's going to happen to food supply and prices in January. **We're not in a position to bulk buy**. And we already struggle to afford all the fresh food we should eat - 5 portions of fruit and veg a day x 4 = 140 portions of fruit and veg a week - those healthy start vouchers don't stretch that far! (Nellie K)

\*discussed in detail in Brewer & Patrick (2021) [here](#)

---

---

# INTERSECTING INSECURITIES

- Unfortunately, **our months have become filled with stress & anxiety on how to financially survive a month.** This week schools went back in Scotland. My daughter refused as she was **very anxious & worried** about the new rules & guidance. Unfortunately, her school is insisting she goes back on Monday. This meant that I had a mad rush on trying to find a way to afford a school uniform for my daughter. (Dotty G)
-

---

# RELIANCE ON EMERGENCY PROVISION

- **“I’m so very grateful for these boxes from charity, I feel guilty for using but also grateful.** The kiddies are happy with crisps and biscuits provided, even some mini microwave treacle cakes and custard. That’ll make a nice treat. I’m sad at having to bin some items, in the box was two tubs of sweating and stinky carrots. Normally I’d clean and cut and freeze but when I cleaned and cut these half were turning black within so to be safe I binned the lot (last thing we need is food poisoning while in lockdown)...Of the bread, all were dated 16th, two days ago. No worries, I’m pretty good at making food last and use by dates are subjective, depending on the product, alas these breads weren’t child suitable: two were open, stale and smelt weird. One was rock solid, kids used it as a drum it was so hard (gave them a good giggle and an opportunity to explore what happens as food expires). The last was unopened and looked safe to use. I opened it after I’d put everything away, to make sandwiches, and the smell of mould was sickening. I hated having to bin them. **I know beggars can’t be choosers but four loaves of inedible bread was an emotional blow at the time..”** (Holly W, single parent)
-



---

# NEGATIVE MENTAL HEALTH IMPACT

- “Since the two household rule was introduced, I just felt a huge sense of dread. Lockdown was really hard, I was barely getting back on my feet emotionally and financially to start socialising again and then the new rules were set. **I couldn't afford the eat out to help** out so we never managed to do anything before the rule of six came into play. **The isolation is really debilitating and the loneliness is crippling at times.**” (Danni M)
-

---

# EXCLUSION FROM NATIONAL NARRATIVE

- Relentless is the best way I can describe life right now. I'm constantly surrounded by people and I am desperate to be alone. I am fed up of the mundane realities of living in lockdown. It feels like we are living in Groundhog Day and I can't see a way out. Even when the schools return next week I will still be here working from home and living the same day over and over. **I'm also fed up of seeing people on social media telling me their plans for when lockdown is over. Booking holidays and festivals. I can't afford that. When lockdown is lifted we will still have to stay at home because financially we won't be able to afford to go anywhere else.** I want to be on my own for an hour or two just to think my own thoughts without anyone interrupting. I want to talk to people about things other than covid. Most of all I'd like some spare money to actually be able to plan a day out so that my kids can have something to look forward to with the rest of the country. (Rosie J)
-

---

# EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL SECURITY THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

---

---

# TEMPORARY MEASURES WELCOME BUT...

- ‘The **£20 is the bare minimum of help to be honest.** I know that sounds ungrateful but £20 doesn’t cover much these days. By the end of the month we are still choosing between eating and heating. We have always aimed to do better by our children than what we had but it’s almost impossible. No one in today’s day and age should be choosing between eating and heating.’ (Lexie G)
-

---

# ABSENCE OF TARGETED SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

- I am 33yrs old . My daughter is 13 yrs old. Am single mum. Who escaped domestic violence from my own family few years ago. I raise my daughter alone. I can honestly say the guilt I feel inside is something I can't explain. **I can't afford internet so my child has not done homework. She has basically been that bored my child become self destruct.** (Jasmine W)
-

---

# DEBT DEDUCTIONS PUSH FAMILIES DEEPER INTO POVERTY\*

“It is simply the difference in being able to pay our rent. Our money is already tight without any extra deductions.”

“I’m not able to afford my rent this month. The debt from past benefit payments has been restarted, as a result we may become homeless... Fantastic! I’m so tired of this all. Destitution was never the plan.”

Aurora

\*Discussed in detail in Patrick & Lee, 2021, [here](#) / also see analysis of budget changes [here](#)

---

---

# CONTACT WITH ADVISERS IN A NEW CONTEXT

- **Today I was scheduled to have a telephone interview from a medical professional for Universal Credit. in the letter it specifically stated that there was to be limited back ground noise.** my son is 6 and very demanding. the threat of my money getting stopped if this interview didn't go ahead meant I had to ask my son's father. I am a survivor of domestic violence and asking him for anything pains me but I had no choice. my son's father reluctantly got out of work early. when it was time for my interview and after all the stresses and strains and worries about the Universal Credit threat of money stopping; a lady contacted me from the organisation to say some of the medical staff phones in sick today and that they had to reschedule. I was so upset. I had worked myself up to explain why during CoVid19 it was nearly impossible for me to look for work and get a job when my 2 children are not returning to school full time and that I need to be here to home school them. it's just a messed up system getting vulnerable people (Charlotte P)
-

---

# THE RETURN OF CONDITIONALITY

- So now I have to be the obedient pup and jump through the hoops, apply to jobs who won't take me, send out cvs to organisations that might have people my ex knows who may recognise my name, risking my whole family **just so I can say "I tried but no interviews yet", etc.** Eventually I'll be forced to do those useless "jobsearching courses" and waste hours each week doing the same things I do at home but without the option of hugging my kids (Victoria B)
-



---

# PERSISTING BENEFIT AND POVERTY STIGMA

- Applied for a discretionary grant today and trying to justify what I need money for is not nice. I know they will try and offer me a loan when they ring, I'm already trying to pay 1 of those off and was doing so until this, I've worked most of my life bar a few months when i was 18. **This is humiliating and degrading and makes you feel like you have to justify your existence to a stranger.** (Teddy W)
-

---

# (VERY) BRIEF REFLECTIONS

- The social security system went into the pandemic ill-equipped to offer effective security to families (Garnham, 2021)
  - The Government's response has worked with and continued existing narratives of 'welfare'; and has failed to protect families from often extreme hardship
  - While the Universal Credit system did respond speedily to the massive increase in claims at height of the first lockdown (see Summers et al, 2021), there are endemic design issues that remain unaddressed (Griffiths, 2021; Patrick & Simpson, 2020)
  - Much more needs to be done to try and design stigma out of the social security system
  - Building back better must be bolder on social security, and must work with and recognize the expertise of experiences of poverty and social security receipt.
-