

# CHILD POVERTY, CORONAVIRUS & CHRISTMAS

A REPORT  
DOCUMENTING THE  
EXPERIENCES OF  
CHILDREN LIVING IN  
POVERTY AT  
CHRISTMAS

REPORT BY EMILY  
DOUGLAS

(DECEMBER 2020)







# INTRODUCTION

With 1 in 4 children now living in poverty in London [1], the work of the Childhood Trust is more important than ever in alleviating the impact of childhood poverty. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic and the associated hardships of winter are creating damaging consequences for children; disproportionately affecting the most disadvantaged children in society.

The Childhood Trust's recent research highlights the extent and gravity of the struggles faced by disadvantaged children against the backdrop of the Coronavirus pandemic over the Christmas period. These include very high levels of material deprivation, feelings of isolation, loneliness and shame, food insecurity, fuel poverty, jealousy of other children's experiences with Christmas and homelessness.

[1]<https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/child-poverty-facts-and-figures>

# KEY FINDINGS

- Over two thirds of children supported by charities in London are not looking forward to Christmas or find the Christmas period a difficult time of year. ·
- The reasons given why disadvantaged children find this period of time difficult are: experiences of poverty (89%), anxiety (74%), stress (65%), feelings of isolation (58%), parents or carers with physical or mental health problems (53%), living in temporary accommodation (53%), food insecurity (46%), boredom (46%), getting few presents (44%), fuel poverty (33%), being a young carer (33%), domestic violence (31%), alcoholism or substance abuse (31%) and lack of sufficient winter clothing (28%). ·
- Furthermore, for those celebrating Christmas, experiences of poverty mean that as many as 39% of children are not expecting to receive any Christmas presents this year – out of the over 84,000 children surveyed, this means over 33,000 are at risk of not receiving any presents. ·
- The average value of gifts received by the children will be far lower, than the national average of £130. Our research found that the estimated value being spent on presents for children in poverty is on average just £21.79 per a child. ·
- This survey represents a small number of children amidst the growing numbers who are being forced into poverty by the Coronavirus pandemic. There are many more children who are now facing similar experiences of poverty and destitution, demonstrating the severity, and scale of inequality made worse by the economic and psychological impacts resulting from the pandemic and the measures taken to contain it.

# FOOD POVERTY

Food poverty remains a significant problem among children in poverty in London. Food poverty is defined as the 'inability to afford, or have access to, food to make up a healthy diet'[2], which takes into account the affordability and availability of the food for households. Most recent estimates in 2020 suggest that as many as 400,000 children in London are in food poverty[3].

The impacts of food poverty are more than just going hungry – it leads to a poorer quality diet, more difficult access to food, a higher percentage of income spent on food and a restricted range of food, particularly access to fresh fruit and vegetables, which are essential for growing children. The causes and contributing factors relating to food poverty are complex, and are exacerbated by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Firstly, many disadvantaged children and young people rely on free school meals, as it guarantees them at least one fulfilling meal a day. In 2019, nearly one in five children qualified for free school meals, a figure of nearly 1.28 million children and young people[4]

**'IT MAKES ME SAD  
LOTS OF CHILDREN  
WON'T GET A  
CHRISTMAS DINNER'  
CHILD, 10 (IN VIDEO  
INTERVIEW)**

Over Christmas, many children are unable to access free school meals, leading to holiday hunger, and, as many charities and organisations are partially closed over the Christmas break, it removes another safety net for disadvantaged children. Food banks usually supplement the shortfall in services, with a third of all emergency supplies distributed by the Trussell Trust network going to children[5]. This wide-spread, pre-existing problem is expected to be worsened significantly by the impact of coronavirus.

[2]<https://www.sustainweb.org/foodpoverty/whatisfoodpoverty/>

[3]<http://www.fruitnet.com/fpj/article/180602/400000-london-children-are-food-insecure>

[4]<https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/pupils-eligible-free-school-meals-borough>

[5] <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2018/08/03/call-donations-charity-reveals-rise-food-children-behind-increased-foodbank-need-holiday>

# FOOD POVERTY

Whilst the Government's new £170m Covid Winter Grant Scheme to support disadvantaged children and families in England over winter is welcome, experience from the previous pilot scheme has demonstrated that it is highly unlikely to be adequate in London where only three London Boroughs received holiday meals grants this summer, excluding tens of thousands of children across the capital from the continuation of free meals during the holidays at a time when they were needed more than ever.[6]

## FOOD BANK USE IS EXPECTED TO INCREASE BY AT LEAST 61% BY CHRISTMAS 2020

During the first lockdown, it was estimated that nearly 20% of children went hungry, with a reported 81% increase in the number of people needing support from its food banks compared to the same period last year[7]. The Trussell Trust predict that food bank use is expected to increase by at least 61% by Christmas 2020, - a year-on-year increase of 300,000 parcels[8]. With unemployment levels rising, with 16-24yr olds being the worst age group affected with 16.1% unemployed as of April 2020 and many informal workers unable to access the furlough scheme[9], the pressure on low income families to provide children with enough to eat over Christmas will be greater than ever.

**"CORONAVIRUS WILL MAKE IT EVEN WORSE FOR THOSE WHO ALREADY STRUGGLE AT CHRISTMAS"**

[6] <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/thousands-of-children-to-benefit-from-free-meals-and-activities>

[7] <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2020/05/01/coalition-call/>

[8] <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/sep/14/coronavirus-extreme-poverty-in-uk-will-double-by-christmas-trust-predicts>

[9] <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/oct/13/uk-unemployed-young-people-tell-of-despair>

# FOOD POVERTY

Food poverty isn't just about being hungry – the long-term impacts on children are extensive, and will have a profound impact upon their life.

Some children will be malnourished as a result of either insufficient or poor-quality food, which in turn leads to a greater chance of recurring and chronic illnesses. In early years, the impact is even greater, as it can limit physical growth. Mentally, development may be impaired, and when hungry children attend school, they will often do worse than their less disadvantaged counterparts.

Food poverty can also lead to higher rates of obesity, as expensive, healthier food is not available to children, creating a host of other health problems, including greater chance of suffering from heart disease or Type 2 diabetes[10]. Additionally, the stress upon children is significant, and many often feel embarrassed or stigmatized admitting they are hungry or having to use free school meals.

## MATERIAL DEPRIVATION

Material deprivation is defined as the 'inability for individuals or households to afford consumption goods or activities that are typical in a society at a given point of time'[11] – this is often particularly more noticeable during the Christmas period, as it is during the Christmas period where disparities between children become most evident. The indicators used to measure relative material deprivation vary from study to study, however, the common theme is that at the time, the social norm would dictate that children should be able to experience these things.

[10]<https://theconversation.com/child-obesity-is-linked-to-deprivation-so-why-do-poor-parents-still-cop-the-blame-106954>

[11]<https://stats.oecd.org/glossary/detail.asp?ID=7326>



## OVER 1 MILLION CHILDREN WILL FACE SERIOUS MATERIAL DEPRIVATION OVER THE CHRISTMAS PERIOD

In a 2018 study, an estimated 45% of children living in poverty in London were materially deprived (compared to 38% in the rest of England)[12], meaning they often went without material things such as access to outdoor play space, the ability to go on school trips, being able to go on holidays or the ability to invite a friend over for dinner. In winter 2019, it was estimated that almost 1 million under-10s will face serious material deprivation over the Christmas period[13]. Meanwhile, in London, around 100,000 children will live in material deprivation, with 9% of children in inner London living with a severe low income and material deprivation[14].

**'CHILDREN WHO LIVE IN POVERTY DON'T HAVE LAPTOPS, VIDEO GAMES ... IT'S A SAD NOT HAVING WHAT EVERYONE ELSE HAS' (CHILD, 9)**

Being materially deprived has substantial impacts upon the children; and can lead to feelings of exclusion, embarrassment and shame. One research session with children found that they felt it was necessary to have certain material objects to help them fit in with their peers, and prevent isolation as a result. They also believed it would help them feel happier as they could enjoy these items, and build relationships with their access too, such as by being able to access an after-school club[15]. Therefore, with a substantial number of children living in poverty suffering from material deprivation this Christmas, there will be an increased sense of shame and embarrassment from parents who cannot provide presents and other material goods at Christmas, while the children will feel left-out in comparison to their peers.

**90%**

of children will experience some form of material deprivation over the Christmas period.

**95%**

of children reported feeling ashamed or somewhat ashamed of poverty at Christmas.

[12]<https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/data/children-and-material-deprivation/>

[13]<https://my.actionforchildren.org.uk/news-and-blogs/press-releases/2019/december/three-children-in-every-primary-class-face-christmas-deprived-of-the-basics/>

[14]<https://data.london.gov.uk/economic-fairness/living-standards/material-deprivation/>

[15][https://www.lotc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Missing-Out\\_a-child-centred-analysis.pdf](https://www.lotc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/Missing-Out_a-child-centred-analysis.pdf)

# FUEL POVERTY

At Christmas, there is the expectation of a warm and safe home for every child, however, this is certainly not the case. The condition of being in fuel poverty occurs when a household is unable to keep their living space at a sufficiently adequate temperature due to financial reasons. This situation can result from a combination of issues such as low income, high fuel prices, poor energy efficiency and other factors. A household is considered to be fuel poor if they have an above average fuel cost, and if this was to be spent, then they would be left below the poverty line.

## OUR RESEARCH SHOWS 33% OF CHILDREN WILL NOT EXPERIENCE A WARM HOME THIS CHRISTMAS

In London, it is estimated that 12% of households live in fuel poverty[16], a total of 390,000 households. This shows a 25% increase from 2009.

In Newham alone, this figure is 19.1% of households[17]. Furthermore, it is estimated that one in five young people currently live in fuel poverty, while 40% of households living in cold homes have dependent children[18].

This has a devastating impact upon children, both physically, mentally and emotionally. In terms of physical health, children are twice as likely to suffer respiratory problems (such as asthma) when living in fuel poverty[19], resulting in higher levels of hospital admissions and worse symptoms of minor illnesses. Growing up in fuel poverty has also been linked to slower developmental progress[20].

Fuel poverty can also have a number of indirect impacts, such as lower rates of educational attainment in school, and a strain upon young people's mental health. Often, those in fuel poverty will result in either limiting energy consumption, leading to cold, dark and unsafe homes, while other households may have to restrict other spending (such as on food), perpetuating a further cycle of poverty[21]. Over the Christmas period, a combination of colder temperatures and spending time at home significantly worsens the impact of fuel poverty.

[16] <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/fuel-poverty>

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] [https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/ncb\\_fuel\\_poverty\\_report.pdf](https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/ncb_fuel_poverty_report.pdf)

[19] <http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/resources-reports/the-health-impacts-of-cold-homes-and-fuel-poverty/the-health-impacts-of-cold-homes-and-fuel-poverty.pdf>

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] <https://extra.shu.ac.uk/ppp-online/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/child-youth-fuel-poverty.pdf>



# TEMPORARY ACCOMMODATION

Homelessness in children and young people often goes unnoticed, as being in temporary accommodation has a devastating impact upon children and young people. Last Christmas, an estimated 135,000 children in Great Britain were homeless and living in temporary accommodation[22]. London has the highest rates of childhood homelessness in the United Kingdom, with 1 in 24 children currently homeless, some 88,000 children[23] while four councils in London have child homelessness rates of one in every 12 children. London's housing system is in crisis, and those who will pay the ultimate price are children in living in poverty. London has some of the highest renting costs in the UK, and this disproportionately affects those in poverty – for those not in poverty, on average, 18% of their income is spent on housing, compared to 56% for those in poverty. As a result, more and more families are struggling to keep up with the costs, leading to outcomes such as living in sub-standard housing, or in temporary accommodation.

Additionally, the significant shortfall of housing stock is pushing more and more children into temporary accommodation – as many as 52,000 new units are needed to cope with the number of families in temporary accommodation[24]

**'I THINK THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD DO MORE TO BUILD HOUSES FOR THOSE WHO NEED THEM'**

The experience of living in temporary accommodation is often a disturbing experience for children, who are unable to have a safe space for themselves, or the rest of their family. In one study, 90% of parents living in temporary accommodation said their children's health had been negatively impacted[25], both mentally and physically. Where the accommodation is of poor quality, there is an increased chance of catching common colds, worsening respiratory health, and sleep deprivation, all of which can have significant impact upon children long-term.

Furthermore, children living in temporary accommodation will often experience feelings of isolation, loneliness and embarrassment, as they often cannot do something so simple as invite a friend over to play or for dinner. As a result, the experience of children in temporary accommodation deeply impacts the child and many will feel they cannot enjoy their Christmas in temporary accommodation.

[22][https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/dec/03/at-least-135000-children-in-britain-will-be-homeless-at-christmas?](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/dec/03/at-least-135000-children-in-britain-will-be-homeless-at-christmas?CMP=share_btn_link)  
CMP=share\_btn\_link

[23] [https://england.shelter.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/1876518/Generation\\_homeless.pdf](https://england.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/1876518/Generation_homeless.pdf)

[24]<https://www.trustforlondon.org.uk/news/temporary-accommodation-london-system-crisis/>

[25][https://england.shelter.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/48465/Research\\_report\\_Sick\\_and\\_Tired\\_Dec\\_2004.pdf](https://england.shelter.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/48465/Research_report_Sick_and_Tired_Dec_2004.pdf)

# SURVEY RESULTS

The Childhood Trust’s Child Poverty at Christmas survey was carried out in participation with 39 charities supporting children throughout all London Boroughs, that are collectively supporting a total of 84,000 disadvantaged children aged 4-18. The questions were distributed to these charities along with an advisory guide on interviewing children about their experiences. The data draws upon children’s personal experiences, in addition to the charity’s knowledge of children’s and their families’ experiences at Christmas.

## SURVEY FINDINGS

Percentage of children who are not looking forward to Christmas or do not find the Christmas period enjoyable: **67%**

Reasons for not enjoying Christmas	Percentage of children	Number of children
Experiences of Poverty	89%	74,476
Anxiety	74%	62,744
Stress	64%	54,274
Feelings of isolation	59%	50,034
Family health issues	54%	45,794
Homelessness	54%	45,794
Food insecurity	46%	39,009
Boredom	46%	39,009
Few presents	43%	37,313
Fuel poverty	33%	27,985
Being a young carer	33%	27,985
Domestic violence	31%	25,441
Substance abuse	31%	25,441
No winter clothing	28%	23,745

# SURVEY RESULTS

---

Percentage of children and young people supported by partner charities who say they will not receive any presents this Christmas: **38%**

Number of children who will not get any presents this Christmas, based on sample size: **33,073**

Percentage of children and young people supported by partner charities that will go hungry over the Christmas holidays: **43%**

Number of children who will go hungry over the Christmas holidays: **36,466**

Percentage of children and young people supported by our partner charities that will rely on food banks over the Christmas holidays: **48%**

Number of children who will be relying on food banks over the Christmas holidays: **39,857**

Percentage of children and young people supported by our partner charities that will experience fuel poverty at some point during the Christmas holidays: **33%**

Number of children who will experience fuel poverty: **27,985**



# SURVEY RESULTS

---

Percentage of children and young people supported by our partner charities that will feel lonely and isolated over the Christmas period:

48%

Number of children who feel lonely and isolated over the Christmas period:

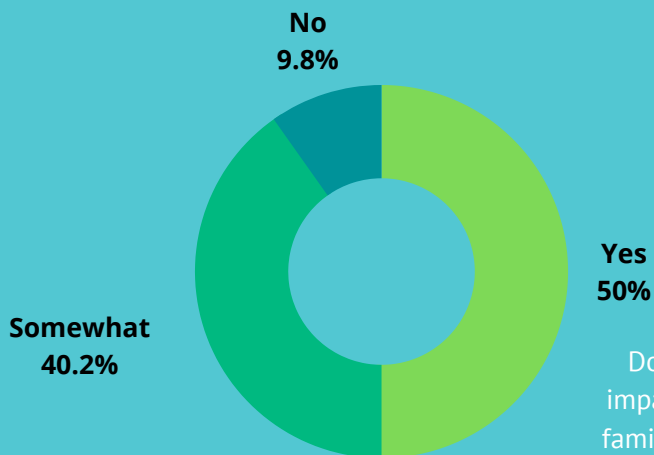
39,857

The national average amount of money spent on children represents for Christmas is £130. For children who will receive presents, the average amount parents expect to be able to spend on them for Christmas is:

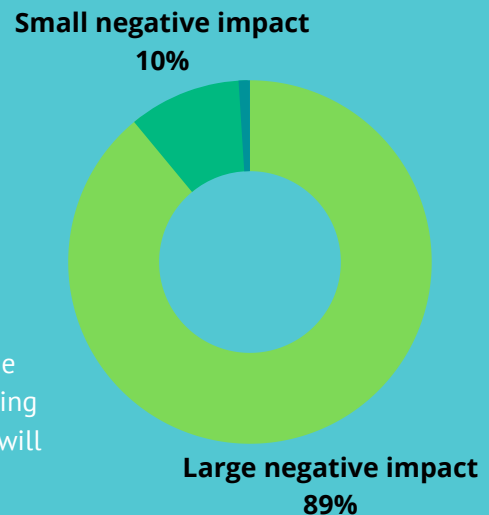
£21.79

---

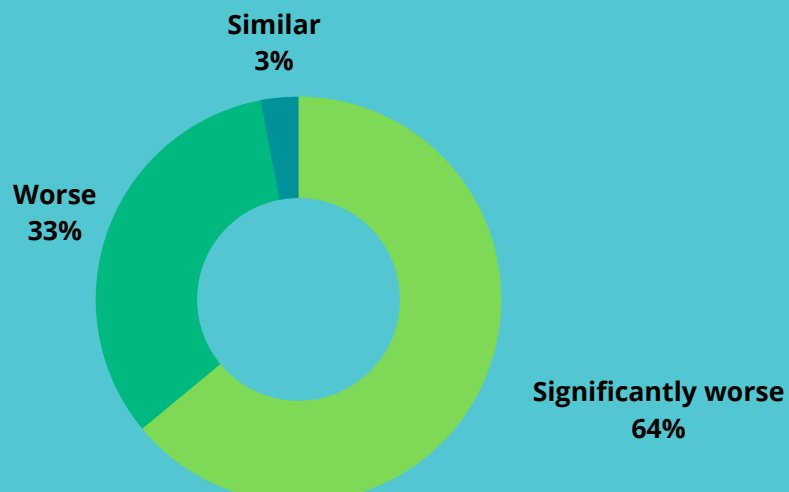
Do you believe that disadvantaged children feel ashamed or embarrassed about their experience of Christmas compared to others?



Do you believe that coronavirus will have a negative impact on children's experiences of Christmas?



Do you believe that the impact of poverty affecting families over Christmas will be worse this year compared to last?



# CHRISTMAS CHALLENGE

---

To combat the inequalities facing children living in poverty and to restore hope, health, wellbeing and happiness in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, The Childhood Trust is launching the Christmas Challenge appeal that will run for one week from 1st to 8th December 2020.

The Christmas Challenge appeal is a matched fundraising campaign that doubles individual donor's donations made via an online portal operated by our partners, The Big Give. The campaign is aiming to raise £3,000,000 to fund the delivery of 85 projects throughout London providing a comprehensive programme of vitally needed services to meet the practical and emotional needs of more than 80,000 vulnerable and disadvantaged children this Christmas and throughout 2021.

Our Christmas Challenge 2020 will help to ensure that thousands of children and young people across London are resilient, hopeful and able to make the most of their educational opportunities going forward. In this way we hope to mitigate the long-term damage caused by COVID-19 to London's most vulnerable children.

## ABOUT THE CHILDHOOD TRUST

---

The Childhood Trust is London's child poverty charity. Our work is focused on supporting the 700,000 plus children living in poverty in London. Since our inception in 2013, The Childhood Trust has raised more than £18.4 million through our matched fundraising campaigns that have enabled us to fund the delivery of 616 child poverty projects across all 33 of London boroughs, engaging more than 390,000 children and young people to date. In addition, we run two corporate volunteer programmes: 'Decorate a Child's Life' and 'Meals that Matter,' that have directly benefited 3,432 children and young people.

In tandem with these initiatives our advocacy programme works directly with disadvantaged children and young people to raise awareness of the causes and consequences of child poverty to help drive systemic change. We promote the voices and experiences of children living in poverty, through the media and our events, to ensure that the reality and tragedy of London's child poverty crisis remains visible and understood.