

Supported by

JRF JOSEPH
ROWNTREE
FOUNDATION

It takes a village

– how to make all childhoods matter



Executive summary



Little Village is like a foodbank, but for clothes, toys and equipment for babies and children up to the age of 5. We've grown to become one of the biggest baby banks in the UK, supporting over 11,000 children since we launched in 2016. To mark our 5th anniversary, we commissioned exclusive research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to examine the rates, persistence and depth of poverty in families with babies and pre-school children.

Alongside our own qualitative research with families undertaken during the Covid pandemic, this analysis provides a unique insight into the scale and impact of poverty amongst families with babies, toddlers and young children in the UK.

What the analysis tells us

Our new analysis reveals that 1.3 million of the 4.2 million children in poverty in the UK are babies and children under the age of 5. Households where there is a child under 3 face the highest risk of poverty.

Furthermore, we found that, for families with at least one child under 5:

- A third (34%) of children in these families now live in poverty.
- London has the highest rates of poverty for children in these households (43%). London is followed by the North East (42%) and the West Midlands (39%). The lowest poverty rates in the UK for children in these households are in Scotland (28%), the South West (28%) and Northern Ireland (27%).
- Poverty has risen faster in the last decade for children in these families than for families with older children.

- Two in five of these families (38%) have seen a reduction in their earnings as a result of the Covid crisis

"I don't want to ask too much, you don't want to sound like a burden to those who are working, or to the government. But yeah, I think food, just food and light would be nice. To keep warm so you don't catch pneumonia or whatever."

Single mum of 3 children, 2 with autism

We looked at the depth of poverty as well as the scale of it. We found that:

- A quarter of the babies and toddlers currently experiencing poverty are living below 50% of the poverty line.
- Children in families with young kids are at greater risk of persistent poverty, increasing the risk that they do not reach their full potential as adults
- London has the deepest poverty of anywhere in the UK. On average, children in poverty in the capital live further below the poverty line than children elsewhere in the country.

Finally, our analysis shows that some households with young children are at a much higher risk of poverty:

- 56% of children in lone parent families,
- 53% of children in Black and Minority Ethnic families,
- 52% of children whose parents are aged under 25,
- 46% of children in families with three or more children,
- 41% of children who are disabled or have a disabled family member.

Little Village works on the frontline supporting families with young children who are struggling to make ends meet. We see first-hand what these abstract figures mean in reality for children's lives today. We see the challenges and systematic constraints trapping families in poverty, which are being made worse by the pandemic. Parents are facing acutely restricted options, forced to decide whether to feed themselves or pay the bills, worrying how long the last nappies will last, or how they will afford new shoes for their child.

In this report, as well as sharing this new data, the families we've supported describe their experiences of raising children on low incomes, in their own words. Together these stories paint a picture of daily difficulties, an absence of hope and a deeply-felt sense of shame. Parents feel the judgements others make of them, and it stings - all the more so given their determination to give their children the best possible start in life. These parents are raising young kids in very challenging circumstances, and that demands resilience, creativity, self-belief and deep determination to keep going.

What needs to change?

Families are being swept up in a tidal wave of low wages, insecure work, a decade of benefit cuts and freezes, and rising living costs. But there is a mismatch between this reality and popular accounts of poverty. Powerful stigmas and stereotypes shroud the real causes of poverty. Widespread, damaging and unjust stories about people in poverty get in the way of building popular support to address the issues.

Too many children are being left behind. But child poverty is not inevitable: we can make a choice to do something about it. We know this because we have successfully tackled it before. The government needs to take child poverty out of the 'too difficult' box, to stop nit-picking over how we measure it, and to start taking real action to address it. There are two central priorities to focus on:

I. More money into people's pockets

Even before Covid hit, families were struggling. Wages for low earners haven't increased in a generation and benefits haven't kept up with the cost of living. Two in three children who are poor have at least one parent in work. More and more families are depending on two incomes, rather than one, to keep their heads above water. The families we support have no cushion to protect them from an unexpected illness, a delayed benefit, a broken washing machine.

The economic changes of the last generation are creating a crisis of a scale we haven't seen in decades. Families need decent wages, greater job security, stability of income, and more affordable housing. And they also need urgent targeted measures such as the extension of the £20 uplift in Universal Credit, to reflect the way in which Covid is hurting the lowest earning households the most.

2. Greater investment now, for all our children's futures

The early years of childhood are precious, and short, but have a huge bearing on future health, education and employment outcomes. We can and should prioritise and protect this period to ensure that all parents are able to offer their children the stability and security that they need to thrive.

We must reverse the hollowing-out of early years services such as Children's Centres and Health Visitors. Cutting these kinds of services is a short-term saving that fails to recognise the value of investing early in children to avoid storing up problems for later. We must also scaffold and support the vital village-building work of frontline charities like Little Village, making it as easy as possible for families to support one another. Organisations like ours should not be a replacement for the welfare state, but we have a crucial role to play as a first line of defence, helping families through difficult times.

The time for action is now

We are a wealthy nation, but as at the start of the 20th century, not enough of this wealth is reaching our youngest citizens. Teenagers today are the first generation who are not universally expected to enjoy a better quality of life than their parents. Our children look set to follow in their footsteps. The desire all parents have – to give their children the best possible start in life – is being crushed for too many parents, to be replaced by a deeply-felt sense of shame, powerlessness and loss of hope.

Our mission at Little Village is to make it as easy as possible for families to support one another. This is about solidarity, not sympathy. We know how hard the early years of family life can be, and what an impact financial difficulties and insecurity can have during this time. We stand with all parents fighting to give their children the start in life they deserve.

This is also about justice, rather than charity. How can it be that so many families are struggling in one of the wealthiest nations? It is not right that child poverty is rising. No child should be without the essentials they need to thrive. We must take action now to address this national crisis.

Acknowledgements

We'd like to thank all the parents we've supported who agreed to take part in the qualitative research for this report. It's not easy talking so honestly about the difficulties of everyday life on a low income and we are grateful for your participation and contribution. Likewise, huge thanks to our Ambassadors, a group of parents we've supported, who helped us to design the research questions in the first place. We hope you are proud of how the work has turned out.

Huge thanks also go to the team at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, who have been brilliant collaborators and supporters of our work.

Special thanks to Grace Hetherington, David Leese, Paul Brook, Ryan Heeley, Francesca Maddison for their insightful contributions to the analysis and argument here.

Finally, we'd like to extend our thanks and enormous gratitude to Tsui-Yee Lau and Jon Williams, our brilliant designers from Coyote, who have supported the creation of this report (as well as countless other projects at Little Village) on a pro-bono basis.



A Little About Us

Little Village

Little Village is like a foodbank, but for clothes, toys and equipment for babies and children up to the age of 5. We've grown to be one of the largest 'baby banks' in the UK, supporting over 11,000 children since we launched in 2016. Families are referred to us via a network of over 1,800 professionals such as midwives and social workers. As a volunteer-led movement of parents committed to alleviating child poverty, Little Village's vision is that every child in the capital has the essential items they need to thrive.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent social change organisation working to solve UK poverty. For more information visit www.jrf.org.uk

Data sources in this report

The analysis was undertaken by the research team at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. They drew on three main sources:

- Most of the analysis of poverty is drawn from the Households Below Average Income dataset (Department for Work and Pensions).
- We used Understanding Society (University of Essex, ISER) to make sense of persistent poverty.
- The Understanding Society, Covid-19 study (University of Essex, ISER) also informed the insights in here around the impact of the pandemic.

