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The effects of poverty on children and young people in the post Covid-19 era.

By Stephen J. McKinney

Introduction

In the latest figures from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 13.4 million people are living in poverty in the UK, representing one fifth of the total population.¹ This proportion varies, of course, in different parts of the UK. There is a notable rise in working poverty where at least one adult in the household is working. The current figures for child poverty in the UK are that 4.2 million (29% of children) are living in relative low-income poverty, once housing costs have been subtracted. Children are dependents and the level of poverty and deprivation they experience is related to the income, or resource, that is available to the household to which they belong. The effects of poverty on children, however, are multi-dimensional and are manifested in many ways. The experience of poverty affects their attendance in school, their full participation in all aspects of school life and has an impact on their levels of concentration throughout the school day.

Covid-19 had a very serious effect on many facets of daily life, on working patterns, on social interaction, on physical and mental health and on school education for children and young people. It also had an effect on students in Further and Higher education. A number of features of child poverty and deprivation were exacerbated by the effects of Covid-19 and this included food insecurity and digital poverty or exclusion. Further, Covid-19 served to highlight forms of poverty that were previously less well known and could be described as 'hidden' forms of poverty such as the poverty experienced by many young carers and uniform poverty. These four forms of child poverty have emerged as some of the major issues that affect school education across the UK in the Post-Covid-19 era. This article will provide an overview of these four key forms of poverty that have come to the forefront in the post-Covid-19 world and will discuss the challenges for children and young people who experience poverty and deprivation and negotiate formal school education on a daily basis.

Food poverty

Food poverty, or food insecurity, was a major concern in the UK in the pre-Covid-19 context. Increasing numbers of families were using foodbanks throughout the UK and the number of children receiving means tested free school meals was rising. In the current post-covid-19 era of inflation and a higher cost of living, the level of food poverty has escalated. The number of children in England eligible for free school meals has risen to 2.0 million from January 2023. This means that 23.8% of children and young people in state schools are eligible and this is the highest rate since current records began in 2006.² The Trussell Trust statistics for April 2022 to March 2023 report that almost three million food parcels were distributed in the UK. This is the highest number of food parcels distributed in a single year by the Trust. The statistics also reveal that one million of these food parcels were distributed to children. As shocking as these statistics are, they are compounded by the data released by the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN). The IFAN is a network of over 550 independent food banks throughout the UK.³ They report that 89% of their member organisations experienced

a rise in demand for food support between January and March 2023. There are serious concerns expressed about the number of pensioners and people in employment who require help on a weekly basis. This has led to anxieties about the continuing role of foodbanks, which were established to address short term needs, and the fact that if this rise in demand continues to increase, they will be unable to provide full support to those in need. These two bodies, the Trussell Trust and the IFAN are large concerns and they provide invaluable services, but there is a plethora of smaller foodbanks operated throughout the UK by supermarkets, churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, community centres and even schools. This creates a serious challenge for an accurate statistical calculation of the number of children and young people who are fed in the UK through food banks. There are some serious questions about the nutritional value of the meals provided for children and young people and the implications for their physical and cognitive development.

While there is ample evidence of increased activity of Catholic schools and Catholic charities in providing food for children and young people, there is the related, and more hidden, issue of the rise of the number of young people at universities who are experiencing food poverty. There are damning reports of young people at universities in America struggling to afford enough to eat. Between a third and a quarter of students in America, including students at Catholic universities, experience food poverty at some point on their programme.⁴ Some research from the Covid-19 period reported a high level of food insecurity in a sample of students from the UK who participated in the research.⁵ One of the causes for food insecurity was the loss of income from employment that had been discontinued during restrictions and lockdowns. The research also noted a relatively high use of ultra-processed foods by the students. The extent of food insecurity among students in universities in the UK still remains under researched and, as a form of hidden poverty, is an area of high priority.

Digital Poverty

Digital poverty existed before Covid-19 and was causing concern that some people would not be able to fully participate in a society and in economic structures that were becoming increasingly reliant on digital technology.⁶ Covid-19 and the imposed restrictions and lockdowns meant that many people had to work from home and the majority of school children had to remain at home (apart from vulnerable children and the children of key workers) and be educated at home. The move to online learning for the majority of children and young people was fairly sudden and there was little time for teachers and pupils to prepare for the new learning environment. In relation to children and young people, digital poverty was experienced in a number of ways⁷. First, there may not have been sufficient access to a suitable electronic device; devices had to be shared among adults and siblings in many households. Second, many children and young people did not have an adequate learning space in the household, nor the use of appropriate furniture for learning activities (table, or desk). Third, there may not have been consistent internet connectivity in the household and, consequently, the opportunities for working online were limited. Children and young people in rural areas faced particular challenges with connectivity. Fourth, the assumption that children and young people were digitally literate was a dangerous simplification. Finally, some parents lacked digital literacy and struggled to support their children in online learning.

It was not just the children and young people who faced serious challenges in this new learning environment, many teachers also struggled to respond to the demands of online learning and teaching. While some teachers faced the same issues with access to devices and connectivity, many teachers had to upskill rapidly and become more proficient in the use of the technology and software. Further they had to acquire more advanced skills in online pedagogy and adopt creative approaches to online learning. Many Catholic schools in the UK, like other schools, offered support throughout Covid-19 and, in the light of what has been learned during Covid-19, some have now revised and updated their digital literacy and digital inclusion strategies. One small scale study in a Catholic school in Hull revealed another facet of digital poverty for pupils. During the lockdowns when social interaction was firmly restricted, the pupils with limited access to digital devices were unable to maintain any kind of constant contact with school friends and this resulted in social isolation from peers and an erosion of social skills.⁸ Another study in America noted the strenuous efforts of Catholic schools to maintain a sense of community through online interaction with children and their families.⁹ Some of the teachers in the research sample commented on the increased importance of faith and prayer during the restrictions and lockdowns.

Young carers

An informal carer is described by the Department of Health and Social Care as: ‘...someone who provides unpaid help to a friend or family member needing support, perhaps due to illness, older age, disability, a mental health condition or an addiction’. The number of informal or unpaid carers in the UK is estimated to be around 7% of the population which equals 4.9 million people. The most recent estimates for 2021/2022 report that 29% of unpaid carers are in relative poverty.¹⁰ It is hard to estimate the number of young carers in the UK, as many have not identified themselves as young carers or have not been formally recognised as being young carers. There are possibly over 800,000 in the UK and they are a group which is often hidden and marginalised. Young carers are classified as those aged 18 or under who are engaged in care and often belong to households that rely on state benefits. It is very important to note that this age limit extends to very young child carers who may be as young as five or even younger. Young carers may often have to support and care for younger siblings. Further, the young carer has to balance caring responsibilities and the demands of school or College or university. Twenty-eight per cent of the sample in a recent survey by the Carers Trust commented that they had never or not often received help in school, college or university to support this balance.¹¹ Many young carers reported being stressed and 49% of females and 32% of males would like some support for their mental health. The demands of caring reduce the amount of social time they can enjoy with their friends.

The poverty experienced by young carers was, to a considerable extent, a form of ‘hidden’ poverty before Covid-19. Research studies had begun to explore this topic in the pre-Covid world, but the challenges faced by young carers were highlighted and became more widely known during the restrictions and lockdowns. Young carers experienced higher levels of pressure and mental stress during Covid-19.¹² They often had to assume additional caring duties as locally organised support systems were suspended during restrictions and lockdowns. There was an increased need for emotional support for those they care for in the uncertainty of the Covid-19 period, and this has continued as many of these families face financial difficulties. When the children and young people were unable to attend school and

engage with their friends, the sense of social isolation increased for many young carers. The daily contact in school with friends often provides respite from the caring responsibilities and when this was limited many young carers felt isolated. As a result of some of the publicity that young carers received during Covid-19, Catholic schools have become more aware of the challenges faced by formally recognised young carers and have also started to identify other children and young people who have caring responsibilities.

Uniform poverty

There is a long history of school uniform in schools in the UK that dates back to the 16th century. In 21st century schools in the UK, there are ongoing debates about the purpose and usefulness of school uniforms in the contemporary world. These are important debates and may lead to changes in the future, but, at the moment, most households have to provide or source the appropriate school uniform for children and young people. There are major issues about the affordability of school uniform for families on low incomes. Statutory Government Guidance on the cost of school uniforms was produced in England in 2021, and this included a strong encouragement to maintain school uniforms.¹³ The Guidance stated that school uniform policy should be easily accessible on the school website for parents and guardians and any changes to uniform policy should involve consultation with parents, guardians and pupils. Schools should ensure that uniforms and other forms of clothing required (e.g. PE or sports kit) are affordable and use a minimum amount of branded clothing. Uniform suppliers should be attentive to cost and value for money, while maintaining quality. The use of single suppliers is to be discouraged and where they do exist, there should be a tendering process. Schools should also ensure that second-hand uniforms are available to those who require them. Interestingly, there is currently no mandate for local authorities to provide school clothing grants in England, though a local authority may choose to provide one, for example, Tower Hamlets and Islington. This contrasts markedly with Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales where local authorities do have to offer clothing grants to families on low incomes.

In Scotland a minimum school clothing grant has been introduced though the criteria for eligibility varies slightly in the different local authorities.¹⁴ Local authorities have the discretion to award a higher level of grant beyond the minimum amount. Nevertheless, there are underlying questions about the minimum grant meeting the school clothing needs of children and young people and the one-off payment covering the costs of wear and tear in the school year. School uniform banks have been established throughout the UK to help families who struggle with uniform costs. The school uniform banks typically provide used items of school clothing in good condition. In the last few years, mirroring the high level of demand in foodbanks, many of these uniform banks have been inundated with requests for school uniform. Some Catholic schools in England, working with voluntary organisations, are able to offer new school uniforms to families who have limited financial resource.

Concluding remarks

This article is replete with figures and statistics that demonstrate the desperate plight of many children and young people who experience poverty and deprivation. This impacts on their formal school education which is described as a universal human right. School education is a means to support children in their cognitive, personal and spiritual development and an

opportunity to acquire qualifications for employment or access to Further and Higher education. Behind these shocking figures and statistics are the stories of individual children and their struggle to negotiate the disadvantage of poverty and deprivation, participate in all parts of school life and prepare for their future. Catholic schools, as is the case for other schools, have a duty of care to children and young people and also have the gospel mandate of the preferential option for the poor. This gospel mandate is inextricably bound to Christian discipleship and is prominent in contemporary Church Social teaching and in Catholic school mission statements. It is enacted through a full awareness of these four aspects of poverty and deprivation (and other aspects of poverty and deprivation within the school), especially the more hidden aspects, and by responding as effectively as possible.

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² Francis-Devine, B. et. al. (2023) *Food poverty: Households, foodbanks and free school meals*. House of Commons Library.
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³ IFAN (2023) *IFAN Survey April 2023*.

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⁵ Defeyter, G. et. al. (2020) *Food Insecurity and Lived Experience of Students* (FILES). London, UK: Parliament. <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/24283/>

⁶ The British Academy (2022) *Understanding digital poverty and inequality in the UK*.
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⁷ McKinney, S. J. et. al. (2023) Beyond the Pandemic – Poverty and School Education in Scotland. *Scottish Educational Review*, 54, 238-264. Open Access. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/27730840-20231002>

⁸ Wright, S. et. al. (2022) Insights from a Catholic school's transition to distance learning during Covid-19. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning*, DOI: [10.1080/02680513.2022.2152667](https://doi.org/10.1080/02680513.2022.2152667)

⁹ Friedman, A. A. et. al. (2020) Looking at Catholic Schools' Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic Through the Lens of Catholic Social Teaching Principles. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 23 (1), 214-242.

¹⁰ Foley, N. et. al., (2023) *Informal Carers*, House of Commons Library.
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¹² King, T. L (2021) Young carers in the COVID-19 pandemic: risks for mental health. *The Lancet*. 16, 100307.
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¹⁴ Shanks, R. and McKinney, S.J. (2022) Cost and Affordability of school uniform and child poverty. *Scottish Educational Review*. 54 (1) 74-87. Open Access: <https://brill.com/view/journals/ser/aop/article-10.1163-27730840-54010003/article-10.1163-27730840-54010003.xml> McKinney, S. J. et. al. (2023) Beyond the Pandemic – Poverty and School Education in Scotland.