



McKinney, S. et al. (2024) The effects of poverty on school education – research from the Poverty and Education Network. *Researching Education Bulletin*, 1, pp. 42-46.

This is the author version of the work. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the published version if you wish to cite from it:

<https://www.sera.ac.uk/publications/researching-education-bulletin/>

<https://eprints.gla.ac.uk/328380/>

Deposited on 25 June 2024

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow  
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

## **The Effects of Poverty on School Education – Research from the Poverty and Education Network**

Stephen McKinney, Alastair Wilson, Rachel Shanks, Dean Robson, Lio Moscardini, Peter Mtika, John McKendrick, Lindsay MacDougall, Kevin Lowden, Kat Lord, Angela Jaap, Katie Hunter, Stuart Hall, Archie Graham and Kirsten Darling-McQuistan.

### **Introduction**

According to recent statistics, 4.3 million children are living in poverty in the UK which amounts to 24% of all children. The statistic is much higher for children who belong to a black and minority ethnic group: 47% (Child Poverty Action Group, 2024). Living in poverty means that there is a constant struggle for the household resource to meet the needs of the members of the household, and children and young people can lack access to sufficient food, adequate heating and clothing and, at times, appropriate accommodation. The Poverty and Education Network was founded in 2014 and has a national and international perspective on the impact of poverty on school education for children and young people. The Network has forged effective working relationships with many of the University providers of Education (and other subject areas) and external bodies such as Scottish Government researchers and NGOs. In recent years, one of the main aims of the research conducted by members of the Poverty and Education Network has been to uncover ‘hidden poverty’. This refers to forms of poverty that affect children and young people that are not known, or less well-known. This work includes, for example, inequalities in access to music education in Scotland (Wilson et.al., 2020). Much of the research by members of the Network, has been presented in the two symposia that we, as a group, present at the annual SERA conference and in some shared publications (McKinney et. al., 2020; McKinney et al., 2023). In this short article we examine some of the research within three periods of time: pre-Covid-19; Covid-19 and post-Covid-19. We justify this on the grounds that the effects of Covid-19 (and world-wide economic crisis) has increased levels of poverty, and this has had a serious impact on many aspects of society and, most notably, school education.

### **Pre-Covid-19**

Covid-19 disrupted almost all aspects of the social, professional, educational and economic spheres of life, as well as having a major effect on physical and mental health and wellbeing of many people. As needs to be pointed out repeatedly, poverty and the impact of poverty affected many children and young people in the pre-Covid-19 era. One major issue was food poverty, or food insecurity. This was evidenced by the number of children and young people who were eligible for free school meals (beyond the universal provision of school meals for children in the lower years of primary schools in Scotland). One of the deficiencies of the free school meal provision: the lack of free meals during extended holiday periods, had been identified and was beginning to be addressed in parts of the UK. The increase in food poverty was further evidenced by the necessity for free breakfast clubs in schools for the most deprived children and the increasing rise in demand for assistance from foodbanks across the UK and (Crawford et. al., 2016; Graham et. al., 2017). The Trussell Trust, the largest group of Foodbanks in the UK, recorded a rise in the number of food parcels distributed from 0.3 million in 2012-2013 to 1.9 million in the immediate pre-Covid period in 2019-2020 (Pratt, 2023). As shocking as these figures from the Trussell Trust are, there are also many independent food banks (supermarkets, community centres, churches, synagogues, mosques) throughout the UK, and the overall uptake of food parcels will be much higher, but difficult to calculate. An interesting focus of

research in Glasgow, conducted by members of the Network, has been the successful ‘mentoring’ of young people from working class and lower-income households as they prepared for public exams (Wilson et. al., 2014; Wilson & Hunter, 2023). These young people were mentored by (predominantly) retired middle-class professionals. The aim was to support these young people in acquiring the appropriate forms of social and cultural capital required to access and adapt to Higher Education.

## **Covid-19**

Forms of poverty that had been identified pre-Covid were exacerbated during the pandemic. One of the troubling yet ironic effects of Covid-19 was that this period also served to illuminate some hidden forms of poverty that affect children and young people. This was troubling because these hidden forms of poverty were quite prevalent but less well known. This was ironic because forms of poverty that were once hidden are uncovered, even in unusual circumstances, and there are opportunities to intervene and support the children and young people who are affected. Covid-19 served to promote a greater awareness of the digital divide, the situation of young carers and the increase in food poverty (McKendrick & Campbell, 2020; Treanor & Troncoso, 2023). A greater public awareness of the digital divide, or digital poverty emerged as it became clear that not all children and young people were able to engage in online learning and teaching in a consistent and effective way. This was due to some, or all, of the following issues: (1) access to devices; (2) learning space; (3) connectivity; (4) digital literacy and (5) parental engagement (McKinney et al., 2023). Another issue that received greater attention was the challenges faced by young carers in the UK. Young carers are children and young people who are below 18, or are 18 and remain in school, who care for a family member, or members, or a friend (ME WE Young Carers, 2022). The caring can be for adults or siblings and the adults can suffer from illness, have a disability, a mental health condition or suffer from drug or alcohol addiction or related health problems. The young carers often belong to households that have limited income. During periods of restrictions and lockdowns, the young carers had to assume greater caring responsibilities, as Social Service support decreased. Further, they were unable to attend school (a respite from caring duties) and connect with friends which led to a deterioration in the mental health of many young carers. As regards the rise in food poverty, the Trussell Trust recorded an increase in distribution of food parcels in 2020-2021 to 2.6 million although there was a dip in uptake in 2021-2022.

## **Post-Covid-19**

While there continues to be some debate about a ‘post-Covid’ period, the effects of Covid have lessened considerably. However, in the last few years, there has been a cost-of-living crisis in many parts of the world, including the UK. The uptake of food parcels reported by the Trussell Trust continued to rise and reached an all-time high of 3 million parcels in 2022-2023. More than a million of these food parcels were distributed for children. Although uniform poverty predated Covid-19, it became more pressing in the immediate post-Covid period as research revealed that there were inconsistencies in the amount of the school clothing grant and the eligibility criteria in Scotland (Shanks, 2022; Shanks and McKinney, 2022). Post Covid-19, some school uniform banks were insufficiently stocked to meet the post lockdown demands. Further, there has been an increased uptake in uniform banks in the cost-of-living crisis since 2022. One of the issues that will have to be explored is the extent to which the restrictions and lockdowns that were precipitated by Covid-19 violated the rights of children and young people, albeit inadvertently, and threatened their health. The limited access to school and school closures prevented children from accessing free school meals throughout the world. While the

rights were violated (arguably) to protect other rights, the implications of the lockdowns meant that food security for many children and young people was jeopardised. While remedial measures were introduced in many places, this does raise serious questions about the precarity of the dependence on the school as the locus of free meals.

Rural poverty and the higher cost of living in rural areas were, and remain, a serious challenge. The cost of food and transport fuel are high and living costs are typically higher than in urban areas (Glass & Atterton, 2022). In the post-Covid period there is a greater focus on the students in Further and Higher Education. There are currently issues about the effects of the cuts in recruitment to Further Education Colleges in Scotland and the very real possibility of a more limited curriculum being offered to students in these Colleges (Rocks and Hamilton, 2024). This will have an impact on widening participation in university for students from the most deprived areas. Another urgent, and under-researched, issue is the impact of poverty on students in Higher Education in the UK. Around a quarter of students are experiencing food poverty and are unable to afford other necessities. This is having a detrimental effect on the mental health of many students and affecting their studies (Russell Group Students' Unions, 2023).

If you would wish to know more about the work of the Poverty and Education Network or participate in the activities of the Network, please contact Professor Stephen McKinney [Stephen.mckinney@glasgow.ac.uk](mailto:Stephen.mckinney@glasgow.ac.uk)

Stephen McKinney, Kevin Lowden, Angela Jaap and Stuart Hall are at the University of Glasgow.

Alastair Wilson and Katie Hunter are at the University of Strathclyde.

Rachel Shanks, Dean Robson, Peter Mtika, Lindsay MacDougall, Archie Graham and Kirsten Darling-McQuistan are at the University of Aberdeen.

Lio Moscardini is at the Royal Conservatoire, Glasgow.

John McKendrick is at Caledonian University.

Kat Lord is at Queen Margaret University.

## References

Child Poverty Action Group (2024) *Poverty: Facts and Figures*. Available from: <https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/poverty-facts-and-figures> (last accessed 5 May 2024).

Crawford, C., Farquharson, C. & Greaves, E. (2016) *Breakfast clubs work their magic in disadvantaged English schools [Comment] The IFS*. Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/breakfast-clubs-work-their-magic-disadvantaged-english-schools> (last accessed 5 May 2024).

Glass, J., and Atterton, J. (2022) *Improving our understanding of child poverty in rural and island Scotland*. Scottish Government. Available from: <https://www.ouraberdeenshire.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/improving-understanding-child-poverty-rural-island-scotland-FOR-WEBPAGE.pdf>. (last accessed 5 May 2024).

Graham, N., Puts, E. Beadle, S. (2017) *Evaluation of Breakfast Clubs in Schools with High Levels of Deprivation*. Department for Education. Available from: [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81cd62e5274a2e8ab55e78/Evaluation\\_of\\_Breakfast\\_Clubs\\_-\\_Final\\_Report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81cd62e5274a2e8ab55e78/Evaluation_of_Breakfast_Clubs_-_Final_Report.pdf) (last accessed 5 May 2024).

McKendrick, J.H. & Campbell, S. (2020) *Local Action in Scotland to Tackle Food Insecurity During the Coronavirus Crisis*. Scottish Poverty and Inequality Research Unit, Glasgow.

McKinney, S.J., McKendrick, J.H., Hall, S. and Lowden, K. (2020) What might the Covid Pandemic mean for the SERA Poverty and Education Network? *Scottish Educational Review*. 52 (2), 4-8.

[https://brill.com/view/journals/ser/52/2/article-p4\\_3.xml](https://brill.com/view/journals/ser/52/2/article-p4_3.xml)

McKinney, S. J., Graham, A., Hall, S., Hunter, K., Jaap, A., Lowden, K., MacDougall, L., McKendrick, J. H., Mtika, P., Moscardini, L., Reid, L., Ritchie, M., Robson, D., Shanks, R., Stettin, S., & Wilson, A. (2023) Beyond the Pandemic – Poverty and School Education in Scotland, *Scottish Educational Review*, 54(2), 238-264.  
doi: <https://doi.org/10.1163/27730840-20231002>

ME WE Young Carers (2020) *Enabling Young Carers*. Available from: <https://carers.org/downloads/resources-pdfs/me-we/enabling-young-carers-to-pursue-their-goals-in-life-and-reach-their-full-potential.pdf> (last accessed 5 May 2024).

Pratt, A. (2023) *Food Banks in the UK*. House of Commons Library. Available from: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8585/> (last accessed 5 May 2024).

Rocks, C. and Hamilton, I. (2024) *College cuts spark warning over widening access for students*. Available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-68570190> (last accessed 5 May 2024).

Russell Group Students' Unions (2023) *Student Cost of Living Report*. Available from: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/63f4ed73056f42572785c28e/t/640b4a3d20fc6122160c275e/1678461513650/Cost+of+Living+Report+-+March+2023.pdf>

Shanks, R. (2022). *School Clothing Grant in Scotland Policy Briefing*. University of Aberdeen. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.57064/2164/19088> (last accessed 5 May 2024).

Shanks, R. and McKinney, S.J. (2022) Cost and Affordability of school uniform and child poverty. *Scottish Educational Review*. 54 (1) 26-48.  
<https://brill.com/view/journals/ser/aop/article-10.1163-27730840-54010003/article-10.1163-27730840-54010003.xml>

Treanor, M. & Troncoso, P. (2023) *Digital exclusion in education: What the online learning technology Scholar tells us about inequality in Scottish Secondary Schools*. Heriot Watt University/I-SPHERE. Available from: <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Treanor-Digital-Equality-in-Education-Final-report.pdf> (last accessed 5 May 2024).

Wilson, A., Hunter, K., Spohrer, K., Brunner, R., & Beesley, A. (2014). Mentoring into higher education: A useful addition to the landscape of widening access to higher education? *Scottish Educational Review*, 46(2), 18–35.

Wilson, A., Hunter, K. and Moscardini, L. (2020) Widening the gap? The challenges for equitable music education in Scotland. *Support for Learning*, 35: 473-492. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12328>

Wilson, A. & Hunter, K. (2023) Access and Emergence: A Case Study of a Working-Class Journey into Studying Medicine. *Scottish Educational Review*, 54(2), 194-215. <https://doi.org/10.1163/27730840-20231009>