**Child Poverty Neglect and Covid-19**

The impact of Covid-19 on world economies has been well documented and both UK and Scottish governments have taken unprecedented steps to compensate businesses and some workers.

However, for those working in child protection and family services, the C-19 crisis has only served to emphasise the split between haves and have nots. Families who were already suffering from social and economic inequalities, particularly poverty and debt, may find it even more difficult to provide basic human needs in these calamitous times.

I was in a supermarket queue recently and heard a mother of 3 children complain that selfish hoarders had grabbed all the own-brand cheaper goods she usually relies on and as a result her weekly shopping bill had rocketed. Just one snapshot of how families living from week-to-week face real C-19 challenges on an already low income.

Given that the links between child poverty and neglect have been irrefutably evidenced, those of us working in child protection fear that the impact of Covid-19 outbreak will place even more children at risk of neglect and abuse.

This body of evidence has been developed by the UK wide “Child Welfare Inequalities Project” led by Professor Paul Bywaters, which concluded that “It is time to pay serious attention to the impact of poverty and inequality on children’s chances of experiencing child welfare interventions”.

The study also reports the stark fact that each 10% increase in neighbourhood deprivation brings a 30% increase in children likely to be “looked after” in local authority care or placed on a child protection register.

Following a seminar in Glasgow Professors Featherstone and Morris prepared the following key messages:

***1.       Poverty is a contributory causal factor in Child Abuse and Neglect (CAN) and being in poverty significantly increases a child's chances of becoming looked after or subject to child protection registration***

 ***2.       It has a direct impact … e.g. lack of food, shelter***

***3.       Indirect includes the stress on parental and family relationships of worrying about money, living in poor and unsafe neighbourhoods***

***4.       Poverty is an active feature of everyday life and decision making … it is implicated in all sorts of decisions big and small and colours interactions between parents, parents and children, other family members, neighbours and services***

***5.       Shame is strongly associated with poverty – people in poverty feel shame and are shamed***

***6.       Services can reinforce the shame through their actions and inactions, eg, not providing bus fares or making procedures for recovering bus fare money very bureaucratic***

These findings have been replicated by a major Scottish City which found that 54% of children on the Child Protection Register came from just 6 postcode areas. There was also clear evidence that, according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation rankings, “the vast majority of children on the child protection register lived in the most deprived areas of the city”.

Scotland’s own Independent Care Review highlights two elements of child poverty as being structural and stressor, describing how “the impact of poverty on parents’ resources to look after children is a structural pressure that undermines parents’ scope to look after their children. Poverty then also impacts via stress that affects parents’ ability to function”.

Before Covid-19 struck, there was already growing concern that the Scottish Government was missing its own Child Poverty targets. In December 2019 CPC Scotland was advised that the Relative Poverty target of 10% was in fact sitting at 24% and by 2030, if things stayed the same, would hit 30%.

There were similar missed targets and projected escalations in Absolute Poverty, Persistent Poverty and Combined Low Income and Material Deprivation. Put simply and by every official measure, child poverty was about to get a lot worse.

On 31 March, in response to the Covid-19 crisis, the Scottish Government published new guidance where it acknowledged:

 “*It is also likely that the vulnerability of some children will increase because of the additional pressures placed on families and communities by the Covid-19 outbreak. This may mean that some children could be at risk of harm and neglect, where that would not otherwise have been the case. With people staying at home, we might expect increased incidence of domestic abuse. Children may be exposed to more risks online. We should also be alert to signs that individuals or groups are using the current crisis as an opportunity for the criminal or sexual exploitation of children”.*

It is worth noting that the guidance did not discuss the exacerbating impact of Covid-19 on child poverty, including the heightened risk of child neglect. It did however mention that, when keeping children safe, practitioners should respond to the particular challenge of helping families experiencing poverty to access fresh food for their children. The Scottish Government guidance talks about dealing with poverty outcomes without acknowledging or mitigating the cause.

It is clear to me that additional pressure from Covid-19 induced poverty, overlying as it does pre-existing health and social inequality stressors, will place families under tremendous stress, and inevitably lead to a significantly greater risk of child neglect and abuse.

 Add to that mix a projected increase in domestic abuse, the prospect of families being cooped up in what is often unsuitable accommodation, increased scope for criminal and sexual exploitation, and a reduction in frontline child protection services and staff, and a worrying scenario unfolds.

Many councils and partnerships already had contingency response plans in place before the Scottish Government issued its Covid-19 Supplementary National Child Protection Guidance. As a result, children already identified as vulnerable and at risk from abuse will receive prioritised oversight from Covid-19 stretched local authorities, but there are many other “unseen” children who will be at increased risk of harm during this difficult time.

Many councils and partnerships had already taken steps to mitigate some of the structural impacts of child poverty. For example, among other things, the Scottish City I mentioned earlier is transforming children’s services so they can disinvest from expensive out of area care placements and reinvest in child and family support services. They have also taken steps to ensure that all families with children on the child protection register have an income maximisation check.

There are many other examples across Scotland of attempts to mitigate the impact of child poverty, but the situation will not improve until, as one expert in the field said,

we have a joined-up poverty policy and child welfare/protection policy in a public health approach, underpinned by a social justice perspective.

We are now getting used to the terms “new normal” and “unprecedented”. My personal wish would be that the new normal should include unprecedented measures to address child poverty and neglect.

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