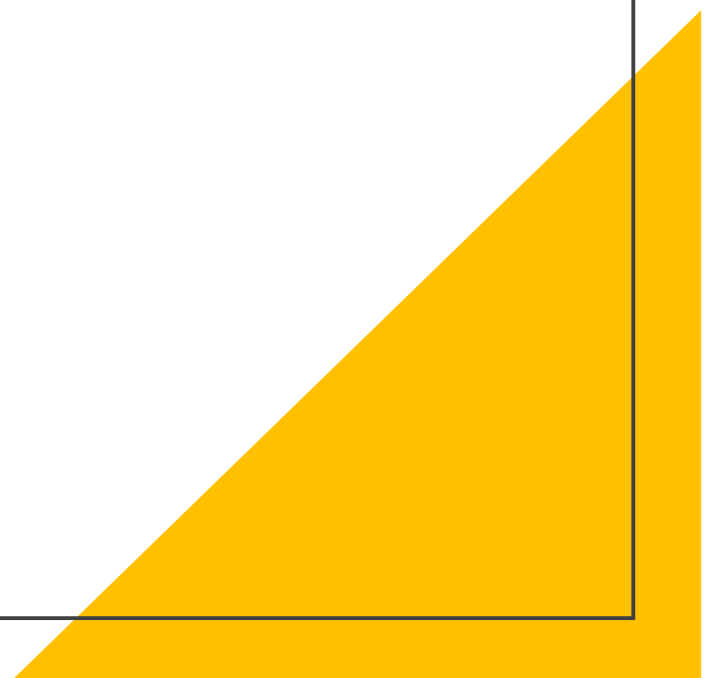


# Poverty aware practice

Hopeful and helpful conversations



# The urgency of now!

- Cost-of-living crisis has, like COVID-19, exposed and intensified deep fault lines in our society
- Many people are struggling but this is not an 'equal opportunity' crisis! And, indeed the term 'crisis' is problematic

# Some background in understanding poverty today

- [The decade that broke Britain: the disastrous decisions that left millions in a cost of living crisis | Politics | The Guardian](#)
- Policies since 2010, from the benefits cap to the bedroom tax, have left particular households very vulnerable amid the cost – of- living crisis.

# The implications for social work with children and families

- [Full-report-relationship-between-poverty-child-abuse-and-neglect.pdf \(nuffieldfoundation.org\)](#)

Up dated review (2022) provides credible evidence that increasing poverty increases rates of child maltreatment and, therefore, demand on services

This evidence makes for uncomfortable reading for a range of constituencies- activists on poverty, professionals and policy makers

# Key point

- *'The causes of maltreatment are multi-factorial and often contested. Neither poverty nor any other single factor is necessary or sufficient for CAN to occur. We view poverty not as a stand-alone factor in CAN, one of a list alongside others, but as intrinsic to other contributory factors, such as parental mental health or domestic abuse and violence. The most widely referenced explanations for the relationship between family poverty and CAN are the investment .... and family stress models, alternatives which are not mutually exclusive'*

# Unpacking causation

- Direct and systemic causation
- Much behaviour lacks moral justification, but is nevertheless made more or less likely by particular circumstances. An under-regulated financial system does not justify irresponsible actions that risk crashing the economy, but causally it makes them likely' (Sayer, 2017: 161).

# Evidence

- Economic shocks increased abuse and neglect except when families were protected by welfare benefits
- Three quasi-experimental studies provide specific evidence of the protective effects of additional income in the form of welfare benefits. For example, If you had a negative income shocks but this was compensated for by benefits, there was no association with Child Protection involvement over a two to four year follow up period
- However, without these benefits, shocks were associated with a 27% increase in any investigation, a 38% increase in physical abuse investigations, and a 25% increase in neglect investigations.

# Protective effects of additional income

- By comparison, negative earnings shocks that were accompanied by an income supplement had no association with CPS involvement.



# Evidence

- Deep poverty and persistent poverty more damaging for children's safety and development than a low income or temporary difficulties.
- Insecurity and unpredictability of income, often the result of benefit administration practices, housing and employment, compound the problems of parenting with an inadequate income
- Gender, age, ethnicity, and health or disability of children and parents influence the ways in which adverse economic conditions affect family life.

# Further findings

Child protection systems and services are too rarely engaging effectively with the impact of income, employment and housing conditions on families and children

**Policies, systems and practice do not adequately recognise how economic conditions are inextricably connected to factors such as mental health, domestic violence and abuse and addictions.**

**New study looking at domestic abuse is of relevance here!**

[Rethinking domestic abuse in child protection: responding differently - Nuffield Foundation](#)

# Findings

- A lack of recognition of parents' difficulties in meeting children's basic needs compounds parents' feelings of **shame** and **stigma**. In turn, this reduces the chances of child protection services establishing effective relationships with families under pressure.

# Obstacles to hopeful and helpful conversations

- **Within society**
- **Within organisations**
- **In everyday practice**



# Individualisation of social problems

- The links between public issues and private troubles have been lost
- Relationship between explanation and causation is often unhelpfully discussed
- The problems with meritocratic thinking

# Michael Gove, 2012

In too many cases, social work training involves idealistic students being told that the individuals with whom they will work have been disempowered by society. They will be encouraged to see these individuals as victims of social injustice whose fate is overwhelmingly decreed by the economic forces and inherent inequalities which scar our society. This analysis is, sadly, as widespread as it is pernicious. It robs individuals of the power of agency and breaks the link between an individual's actions and the consequences. It risks explaining away substance abuse, domestic violence and personal irresponsibility, rather than doing away with them.

Social workers overly influenced by this analysis not only rob families of a proper sense of responsibility, they also abdicate their own. They see their job as securing the family's access to services provided by others, rather than helping them to change their own approach to life. Instead of working with individuals to get them to recognise harmful patterns of behaviour, and improve their own lives, some social workers acquiesce in or make excuses for these wrong choices.



# Anyone can make it if they try!

*'Holding people responsible for what they do is a good thing up to a point. It respects their capacity to think and act for themselves as moral agents and as citizens. But it is one thing to hold people responsible for acting morally; it is something else to assume we are, each of us, wholly responsible for our lot in life'.*



Sandel, M (2021) *The Tyranny of Merit*, London, Penguin (p, 21).

# Widespread beliefs

- Deserving and Undeserving
- The just world thesis
- The conflation of need and risk
- Dependency is bad and should be avoided



# Organizations

- It's not core business
- It's beyond our remit
- It's too political
- We must not encourage dependency




# Workers

- I don't have time
- I will become overwhelmed
- It's not core business
- I will lose my focus on the child
- Underpinned by values that are complex and deeply held
- Inadequacies in training and conceptual underpinnings



# Helpful practice approaches

- Relentlessly empirical and humane
  - A day in the life approach
  - BUT important to remember
  - This approach requires attention to the psycho-social impacts of poverty and inequality
  - Shame and micro-aggressions
- 



# Marry realism and challenge

- Calibrate expectations by using knowledge of lived experience
- What is it like to raise children in this house, on this street, in this neighbourhood?



# Helpful organizational approaches

- Knowing and understanding local data
- Income maximisation and support resources
- Avoiding silos- maximising resources and supports across the council and third sector
- Forming alliances and knowing communities
- Co-production
- Auditing mechanisms
- Training
- Supervision practice

# Selected references

- For details of the Child Welfare Inequalities Project
- [CWIP-Executive-Summary-Final-V3.pdf \(nuffieldfoundation.org\)](https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/cwip-executive-summary-final-v3.pdf)
- Featherstone, B., Gupta, A., Morris, K. and Warner, J (2016) Let's stop feeding the 'risk monster': towards a social model of child protection', *Families, Relationships and Societies*, Advance Access, published on February 15 2016, [doi.org/10.1332/204674316X14552878034622](https://doi.org/10.1332/204674316X14552878034622)
- Featherstone, B., Gupta, A., Morris, K. and White, S (2018) *Protecting Children: A Social Model*, Bristol, Policy Press
- Sayer, A (2017) Responding to the Troubled Families Programme: Framing the Injuries of Inequality, *Social Policy & Society* (2017) 16:1, 155–164

- Supervisor prompt sheet <https://practice-supervisors.rip.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Using-a-social-model-of-child-protection-in-supervision.pdf>
- App by Callum Webb <https://www.cwip-app.co.uk/>.
- Also a number of anti-poverty frameworks eg, <https://www.basw.co.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/anti-poverty-practice-guide-social-work>