

Caring and earning in families with young children under COVID-19: insights from London, UK

Margaret O'Brien

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COVID-19 & UK

- Total UK deaths within 28 days of positive COVID test are now 41,705 (16/09/2020)
- Adjusting for size and age structure of the population, there are 90.2 deaths involving COVID-19 per 100,000 people in England and Wales
- At beginning of pandemic London was the region with the highest proportion of deaths involving COVID-19 30.6%

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsinvolvingcovid19bylocalareasanddeprivation/deathsoccurringbetween1marchand31july2020#local-authorities>

COVID-19 in the UK: policies and experiences

- Place-based - local as well as country level contexts important for understanding policies and experiences - UK, London, Tower Hamlets
- Public health and families focus – interdisciplinary research teams, COVID embedded in pre-existing intersectional inequalities experienced by children, parents & communities. Impact on recovery.
- Families & kin group with a young child (<5 years) & expectant- lives and livelihoods

UCL Project teams:

(i) COVID-19: Social, economic and health impacts among families with young children, and pregnant women in Tower Hamlets

Claire Cameron (PI) Andrew Hayward, Margaret O'Brien, Helen Bedford, Marcella Ucci, Josie Dickerson (Bradford), Hanan Hauari, Katie Hollingworth, Lydia Whitaker. ESRC funded

(ii) Managing paid work and care in low-income families in East London

Margaret O'Brien (PI) Claire Cameron, Hanan Hauari, Rachael Levy, Helen Bedford, Ashraf Hoque, Katie Quy, IOE funded.

Tower Hamlets in London- one of the fastest growing, youngest, & most diverse populations in the UK

A tale of two cities:
London's rich and poor in
Tower Hamlets
Canary Wharf's **corporate towers** look down on
food banks in 'borough of
contrasts'



The Guardian 23rd December 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/dec/23/a-tale-of-two-cities-londons-rich-and-poor-in-tower-hamlets>

Design and methods

- **Longitudinal community survey of pregnant women & families with a child <5–** wave 1 (July- September 2020); wave 2 (April- 2021) target sample 2,000. Mainly mothers and pregnant women 80%/ 20% (female/male). Reported findings today are provisional & illustrative only.
- **Longitudinal qualitative families panel** — wave 1 (October 2020-), wave 2 (June 2021) target 20 family groups, interviews with 3 adults. Sampling dimensions - household (single, couple, multi- generational), income (low, moderate & high) & ethnicity (white British, Asian British, mixed). Links with study ii.
- Community and national **policies, services and resources:** close partnership with local public health & ECEC teams for local mapping, design, community engagement.

UK COVID-19 social policies: lockdown

- National full lockdown March 23rd- July 4th 2020
- **Weak** national explicit policy focus supporting **children, parents & families**
e.g. education & work-family reconciliation, gender equality.
Schools & ECEC remained open for key workers. Partial minimalist opening of ECEC, reception, years 1 & 6 June 1st & full opening early September
- **Stronger** national explicit policy focus supporting **workers**
Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme “Furlough” targeted at employees supporting worker-parents’ ability to maintain a livelihood.
March-October 2020, tapering from August. Unemployment rising.

Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

- Funding direct to employer/ business
- 80 per cent of employee's wages plus employer's national insurance contribution to ceiling of £2,500 a month - equivalent to the UK wage of £30,000 a year (slightly higher than average wage).
- Employers can “top-up” the 20 %.
- Not available to informal workers and the self-employed
- To some extent, parents who have been eligible are the **most advantaged** in terms of access to regular income & parental leave entitlements, but debt rising.

Parents who are non-workers or unemployed: low welfare benefits

- “Universal Credit”- (UC) the UK’s “safety net” social insurance covering “all needs” including housing. £409.89 per month for single claimants aged 25+
- One standard allowance cap for household- £23,000 including rent (London), £20,000 elsewhere
- COVID adjustments- Temporary increase of £20 per week expiring next April 2021. Attendance at the Jobcentre Plus office no longer required.
- Initially on-line waiting was significant as millions applied. **Increase** of 1.2 million by 9 April when 4.2 million people were on Universal Credit & rising. Debt rising.

What are your three biggest worries right now?

1. Virus itself

Note 67 people reported experiencing a close bereavement since lockdown which 31 were due to COVID.

2. Finances & employment

16% of respondents have used a foodbank in the past 4 weeks

Feeling very depressed due to work insecurity, rent/bills and we're not entitled to any local/government support because of No Recourse To Public Fund restriction.

3. Mental health

*Lockdown has made my life 10 times worst and there's not a satisfying moment of it.
Nothing is enjoyable anymore*

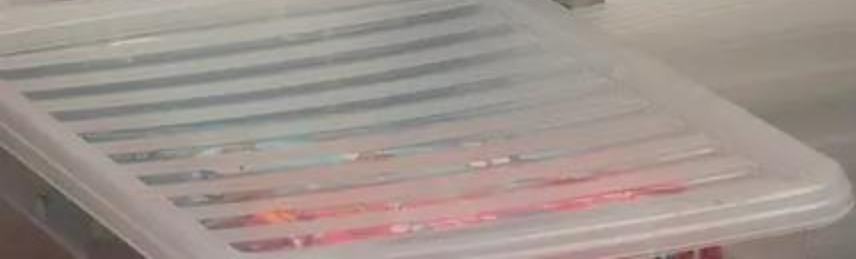
Tower Hamlets: emergency food hub, civil society immediate local response

- Food parcels delivered to over 5,154 residents with urgent needs (April-)
- Run by redeployed staff and volunteers recruited by the Volunteer Centre Tower Hamlets.
- Weekly packing of 12,000 tins of soup and pints of milk, 3,000 eggs and over 10,000 staples including bread, cereal, pasta and rice.
- Focused on extremely vulnerable with highest risk of severe illness from coronavirus & at-risk residents with difficulty getting food, e.g. include very elderly who may be self-isolating or unwell with symptoms of coronavirus and without a support network of family or friends.



0 - 3 years

0 - 3 years



3 - 5 years

3 - 5 years

3 - 5 years

3 - 5 years

3 to 5 years

3 to 5 years

3 to 5 years

3 to 5 years

8 - 10 years

6 - 8 years

6 - 8 years

6 - 8 years

Access to education

- Did you send your child to nursery, school or other childcare during the lockdown? only 36 households in sample did

We were eligible because my husband is an essential worker; however, the initial advice was to keep children at home if we were able, which we were since I am a stay-at-home mum.

Not a key worker, but anxieties about COVID

Nursery closed.

Home working: gender struggles

- How easy or difficult is it for you to combine your paid work with your care responsibilities now?
 - Very/ quite easy 16%, neither easy or difficult 32%, very/ quite difficult 52%. **Mothers** find reconciliation harder than **fathers**.

"Buying" time from my partner so that I can do more work while he looks after the children. This is a constant struggle. My work is more flexible so it is mostly me that has to flex to fit all the work and childcare in.

It is hard to look after newborn and working as NHS worker at the same time. Worries of bringing the virus home.

I struggle with working from home, there are too many responsibilities and distractions (childcare, chores) and I cannot concentrate and get work tasks done

Having to be silent for large periods of time when my husband is on a work call

Pregnancy & birth challenges

- *Being pregnant - not having health care professionals to speak about certain worries. My partner not being able to attend hospital appointments i.e., scans. Taking public transport worries me as people don't comply with wearing masks and authorities not taking action*
- *Leaving work to go on MAT leave was stressful. Worried about giving birth during Covid and not being able to have visits from my husband after baby arrives and being alone in hospital during recovery.*
- *Husband lost job, no help, and on maternity leave so reduced pay
Uncertainty of future*
- *Sleepless nights and anxiety. Going through pregnancy appointments alone as no one is allowed to accompany me*

Home life: more family closeness

- *Our overall domestic life is more settled and happier in some ways. We are all less busy, and our relationships are stronger within our household. We are enjoying more "slow/home" type activities together- e.g. tending houseplants, baking bread.*
- *My husband is around all day as working from home, which makes life a lot easier with two small children.*
- *Spending more time with my children has been a blessing*

But

- *It was ok at first being at home with the family getting some quality family time but there is only so long before you want some normality*

Concluding reflections

- We are in a early data collection phase but there are **signals** that inequalities are having a major impact on families' ability to thrive.
- Amplification of distress is likely as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme ends, debt rises with low levels of welfare/ sick leave benefits to support to precarious workers.
- Variation in ECEC, school and health services a risk for children and parents' wellbeing
- Gender inequalities in work and care likely to be exacerbated.

