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## How COVID-19 crisis measures reveal the conflation between poverty and adversity

### Citation for published version:

Treanor, MC 2020, 'How COVID-19 crisis measures reveal the conflation between poverty and adversity', *Scottish Affairs*, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 475-492. <https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2020.0338>

### Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.3366/scot.2020.0338](https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2020.0338)

### Link:

[Link to publication record in Heriot-Watt Research Portal](#)

### Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

### Published In:

Scottish Affairs

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*Scottish Affairs* 29.4 (2020): 475–492

DOI: 10.3366/scot.2020.0338

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## HOW COVID-19 CRISIS MEASURES REVEAL THE CONFLATION BETWEEN POVERTY AND ADVERSITY

*Morag C. Treanor*

### Abstract

The application of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in public policy and practice ignore the structural circumstances in which children and their families live; the majority of studies on ACEs do not take socioeconomic position into account. Poverty and ACEs are often conflated, which can lead to unintended consequences for children and families and for the implementation of policy and practice. Using some of the COVID-19 crisis response measures in Scotland, in particular the example of the hubs for ‘vulnerable’ children and receipt of free school meals (FSMs), this paper explores how poverty and adversity become conflated and how this can impede children’s access to support and even to their legal entitlements. The sole criterion for eligibility to FSMs, outwith the universal entitlement for P1-P3s, is low income and the dignified response to an eligibility based exclusively on low income is to provide cash. Yet, many local authorities have imposed a nonmonetary approach to FSM eligibility, even when this has proved difficult, e.g. in sourcing food. By assuming that parents living in poverty will misspend monies meant for children they conflate poverty with adversity. The policy focus in Scotland should prioritise poverty, using a cash-first approach, and trust the majority of

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parents to prioritise their children. This would also free up resources to provide dedicated services to children who do in fact experience high levels of adversity.

**Keywords:** child poverty; adverse childhood experiences; free school meals; COVID-19; vulnerability

## **Introduction**

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are defined as stressful events in childhood argued to have devastating consequences on education, employment, health, wealth, family life, parenting and lifespan, as well as leading invariably to ACEs in the next generation (Marryat and Frank, 2019).

The original study defines ten ACEs as: domestic violence; parental separation/divorce; having a parent with a mental health condition; being the victim of abuse (physical, sexual and/or emotional), being the victim of neglect (physical or emotional); having a member of the household in prison; and/or growing up in a household in which there are adults experiencing alcohol and drugs misuse (Felitti et al, 1998). These ten ACEs are focussed narrowly on the family and ignore wider structural inequalities and discrimination that negatively impact on children's lives, such as: racism; families with a disability; young carers; children looked after by the state; homelessness; group-based bullying such as LGBT; unsafe neighbourhoods; low quality housing; food insecurity; modern slavery; bereavement; and refugee and asylum-seeking status, among others. The original ten ACEs are firmly rooted within a child's family and do not cognise the harms caused by structural inequalities and discrimination. Although there are other criticisms of ACEs to be made, and this special edition elucidates a few, this paper will focus on how adversity as measured by ACEs is being conflated with poverty to the detriment of children.

The concept of ACEs, and the application of ACEs in public policy and practice, ignore the social determinants of adversity and the structural circumstances in which children and their families live (Scottish Government, 2020d). That children are more likely to experience adversity in childhood when they also experience poverty and inequality is overlooked and the majority of studies on ACEs do not take socioeconomic position into account, despite its powerful and lasting effects on children's lives. While there is a relationship between poverty and adversity, it is not exclusive: children and young people with no poverty face ACEs and poverty has greater impacts on some forms of adversity over others. Furthermore, the similarities and differences in the

manifestation of poverty and adversity are not always well understood, resulting in the two states often being conflated. These misapprehensions and conflation can lead to unintended consequences for children and families and for the implementation of policy and practice.

This paper begins by highlighting the universally detrimental effects of poverty and inequality on children, young people and their families. It goes on to explore the techniques and behaviours that children, young people and their families employ to ensure they are not identified or defined as living in poverty; techniques and behaviours which can carry forfeits in relation to accepting or receiving support and entitlements. Using some of the COVID-19 crisis response measures in Scotland, in particular the example of the hubs for 'vulnerable' children and receipt of free school meals, this paper explores how poverty and adversity become conflated and how this can impede children's access to support and even to their legal entitlements.

## **The structural frameworks within which we live – poverty and inequality**

Poverty is a structural problem with a lack of income at its core. Poverty is caused by a complex blend of structural and personal issues relating to macroeconomic, political, social and individual factors. Macro-economic factors, such as the structure of the labour market, the housing market, low pay, irregular hours and insecure employment cause poverty. In-work poverty is an increasing problem in Scotland and two thirds of children living in poverty live in a family where at least one adult works (Scottish Government, 2020d). This statistic is likely to worsen due to COVID-19 post-furlough job losses. Political factors, such as the level of social security payments and social security cuts for families both in and out of work, are another cause. These political factors cause financial insecurity which makes poverty dynamic: many people living in poverty exit poverty and each year new people enter into it. This dynamic aspect is not well reflected in the static poverty statistics, which can make it seem as though the same people are living in poverty year in year out, which is not the case. If the proportion of people living in poverty is perceived to be fixed it is easy to think of this group as distinct, as different, as identifiable. This has ramifications for poverty approaches and for those living in poverty at any given time. Social factors, such as gender, lone parenthood, disability, age and race/ethnicity can result in a heightened risk of living in poverty due to unequal distributions of income, power and wealth between groups. And, individual factors in relation to capacities and choices play a part too, although, arguably

'what appear to be individual level factors often reflect underlying social and economic processes' (McKendrick, 2016: 60). It is these social and individual factors that are most visible and, when those living in poverty are perceived to be a fixed population, it becomes easy to mistake the social and individual factors as identifiers or markers of poverty. This can lead to approaches that stigmatise certain groups and individuals.

## **The impacts of poverty and inequality**

The negative effects of poverty on children start in the womb and accumulate throughout childhood and beyond. Poverty is detrimental to children's health, cognitive development, social, emotional and behavioural development, friendships, self-esteem, relationships, experience of education, educational outcomes and on to future employment (Treanor, 2020). Often the balance of concern lies in children's future outcomes; however, it is critical to understand that poverty has detrimental effects on children during childhood too, which makes a compelling case for action to address it in the here and now (Treanor, 2020).

Across all countries, irrespective of income level, a common factor people in poverty report feeling is shame and being made to feel ashamed (Walker, 2014). Such feelings and experiences have also been a strong feature of my research with children and families in Scotland and they lead to complex behaviours to hide poverty (Treanor, 2018). Parents hide their poverty for fear of being thought of as bad parents and of attracting unwanted service intervention. Contrary to the trope of poor parents being poor parents, they sacrifice much, including food, to provide for their children. When there is only one parent to make those sacrifices then lone parents are easily as, or more, deprived than their children (Treanor, 2016). Children also go to great efforts to mask or hide their poverty through shame, embarrassment, and feeling ashamed at being embarrassed by their families' circumstances (Treanor, 2018). Children experience a complicated mix of emotions, and employ an intricate set of behaviours, to hide their experiences of poverty from everyone, including their own parents. This 'concealment of a stigmatised identity' is a classic strategy for coping with stigma (Goffman, 1990). This is likely to mean that a statutory service, such as education, may be unaware of the poverty-related difficulties some families face. What may be more visible to statutory services are adverse experiences, especially when combined with poverty. The former can be invisible, the latter less so. The outcome of this is that poverty can be mistaken for adversity (Treanor, 2020).

## **Poverty and adversity/ACEs**

While poverty is not the same as childhood adversity, children are more likely to experience adversity in childhood when they also experience poverty and inequality. Poverty and inequality can lead to an increase in stress, conflict, mental and physical wellbeing, which increase pressure across all family functions, such as interpersonal relationships and parenting. Yet, in studies of ACEs there is usually no analysis of poverty or inequality per se (Steptoe et al, 2019). In a systematic review of ACEs and the socioeconomic position of the family, Walsh and colleagues (2019), screened 2825 papers on ACEs but only 6 included family socioeconomic position. They widened their screening to include 'child maltreatment' and of 4,562 papers, only 35 (including the aforementioned six) mentioned family socioeconomic position as a potential explanatory variable (Walsh et al, 2019). When they did, almost all showed a clear association between childhood socioeconomic position and risk of ACEs (Walsh et al, 2019).

Two subsequent papers explore the socio-economic position of the family as an explanatory variable in ACEs analyses. In the first, using the Growing up in Scotland data, ACEs are over 10 times more likely to occur in the poorest 20% of the population compared to the richest 20% (Marryat and Frank, 2019). In the second, administrative data were analysed from across England, the results of which show that areas with high rates of child poverty also have a high frequency of ACEs (Lewer et al, 2019). The study concluded that poverty and deprivation increase the risk of adverse experiences in childhood and that the relationship is most likely causal (Lewer et al, 2019).

Some adverse circumstances have a stronger relationship with poverty than others; for example, child abuse and neglect (CAN). CAN has a graded relationship with poverty, i.e. the greater the level of economic hardship the greater the likelihood and severity of CAN (Bywaters, 2016). Although there is a relationship between poverty and CAN, it is important to understand that some children who do not face poverty will still experience CAN and the overwhelming majority of children living in poverty will not (Bywaters, 2016). The influence of poverty, i.e. income, is demonstrated in a United States of America (USA) study where increases in state and federal minimum wages were opportunistically used to explore income's impact on CAN (Raissian and Bullinger, 2017). It was found that increases in the minimum wage reduced the risk of families being involved with child welfare services, especially in relation to neglect and particularly for young children (Raissian and Bullinger, 2017). It was found that a \$1 increase in the minimum wage led to a 9.6% decline in

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neglect reports (Raissian and Bullinger, 2017). This suggests that increasing incomes to families reduces childhood adversities.

This is further supported by a systematic review on the relationship between the socio-economic position of the family and ACEs. It finds that interventions which increase family income act on the common factors which contribute to the incidence of ACEs and so reduces the risk of ACEs (Courtin et al, 2019). The effect sizes were:

... modest for family financial problems, adverse parenting, household mental illness, child maltreatment and neglect; moderate to high for exposure to domestic violence, Home score, parental separation, childhood physical abuse and household criminality; and strongest for childhood victimization and substance abuse. Housing, conditional cash transfer and income supplementation interventions were the most promising interventions' (Courtin et al, 2019: 423).

Child poverty is a key focus of the Scottish Government as demonstrated by the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017 and the attendant new payments to families such as Best Start Grants and the Scottish Child Payment (regrettably delayed due to COVID-19). Additionally, Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) and Attainment Challenge monies are given to schools to tackle the poverty-related attainment gap. These two sources of income for schools are focused on those local authorities with the highest levels of deprivation with the aim of improving literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing. At the local level, the health and wellbeing focus has sometimes meant that monies meant for poverty-related work in Scotland, e.g. the Pupil Equity Fund, are being spent addressing ACEs, (unintentionally) drawing efforts and attention away from tackling poverty and inequality. Through the ACEs lens, poverty is either briefly noted and dismissed, or ignored altogether. For example, in a national report, the poverty-related attainment gap is now just called the 'attainment gap' (NHS Health Scotland, 2017). Poverty is briefly mentioned and then set aside near the start of this report; instead, the authors explain:

The focus of this paper is not on direct measures to influence children's material circumstances, rather on responding to the relational and emotional impacts of childhood adversity (NHS Health Scotland, 2017: 7).

This blurring of the boundaries between ACEs and poverty creates several problems: (1) it reduces support for measures to increase family incomes (as evinced by the quote above); (2) it stigmatises families living in poverty; and (3) it expects parents to alleviate the negative impacts of systemic inequalities

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rather than society tackling the systemic inequalities in the first place (Hartas, 2019). A fundamental flaw in the ACEs approach is that it focuses on the experiences of children as a result of their families rather than as a part of their families. It ignores the truism more readily understood in approaches to alleviate poverty: you cannot improve the circumstances of children without improving those of their family.

This reduced support for increasing incomes to families is well demonstrated in the past decade of austerity which has seen government action decimate incomes and vital services to children, young people and families. Since 2010, across England and Wales, 4,500 youth work jobs have been cut and 760 youth centres have closed (YMCA, 2020). While details on closures of youth centres in Scotland are not readily available, there has been a reported £11m reduction in spending in youth services in Scotland in the three years from 2016 and 2019 (Jones, 2019). Similarly, across the UK since 2010, funding to children's centres has been cut by 62 per cent, 1000 centres have closed, and almost £1 billion less is being spent on children's centres in 2019 than at the start of the decade (Breslin, 2019). The destruction of such vital services impedes effective interventions to tackle poverty and to reduce the impacts of adversity.

This conflation between poverty and childhood adversity is demonstrated in the COVID-19 crisis response measures in Scotland, in particular the example of the hubs for 'vulnerable' children and receipt of free school meals.

### **Scotland's COVID-19 crisis response in relation to children and young people**

From Friday 20 March 2020 at 5pm, schools across Scotland closed in an effort to tackle the spread of COVID-19. As part of the crisis response to COVID-19, the Scottish Government quickly put legislation in place, the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020, and also many guidance measures to ensure children and young people, particularly those considered 'vulnerable', continue to be supported and protected during lockdown and school closures. The guidance measures of relevance to this paper are the: (1) Coronavirus (COVID-19): school and early learning closures – guidance about key workers and vulnerable children (Scottish Government, 2020a); (2) Further Guidance in relation to Key Workers (Scottish Government, 2020c); and (3) Coronavirus (COVID-19): Food Fund guidance for local authorities (Scottish Government, 2020b).



## **The conflation of poverty and vulnerability**

Under the 'key workers and vulnerable children' guidance, 'vulnerable' children can attend critical childcare and learning provision, alongside the children of keyworkers, known as hubs (Scottish Government, 2020a). The allocation of places in hubs are determined by each local authority based on its own assessment of local need, which has led to a great deal of local variation. In its guidance the Scottish Government define 'vulnerable' children as:

... children who may benefit from continuing to attend school or early learning and childcare in the current circumstances, for example those on the child protection register, those who are looked after, and those on the edge of care; those in receipt of free school meals who cannot be provided with meals at home; those who have complex additional support needs; and those affected by poverty and deprivation (Scottish Government, 2020a).

The definition of vulnerable in the Scottish Government's guidance is a cover all term intended to include a wide range of potentially at risk children and young people but, its lack of specificity means it groups together many conditions, such as disability, complex needs, additional support needs, child protection issues and children looked after by the state, under one umbrella. This leads to a broadbrush approach that can miss some of those who are at high levels of risk, e.g. those experiencing domestic abuse, and can cause stigma to those who are not at personal risk but whose family has a low-income. Where a young person is labelled vulnerable due to their family living in poverty they are likely to reject the label, as the word vulnerable is highly stigmatising. This is likely to result in the low use of hubs by children and families living in poverty and is unlikely to provide the different types and levels of support families with high needs require. For example, there may be valid reasons why parents may choose not to send their children, who have been identified as vulnerable, to a hub. If a child, or someone in their household, has a particular health need their parents may wish to keep them at home for fear of their catching, or spreading, the Covid-19 virus. If a child has an additional support need, their parent may not wish them to attend a hub located in an unknown building, possibly in an unfamiliar location, possibly with strange staff and pupils. Such parents may decide that their children will be better off at home. This does not mean that these children are vulnerable and a better, evidenced response is required. Additionally, the language used in the definition, for example, 'on the edge of care', may be familiar to policy-makers and practitioners but is unlikely to be to families. It is a phrase that is likely to cause alarm in families whose

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lives are often already heavily involved in the state, either through their child's education, receipt of benefits, housing or services. This is likely to have adverse effects on families trust in hubs given their fear of state intervention (Treanor, 2018).

The focus of this paper is the fact that this definition of vulnerable conflates poverty and adversity. By so doing it hazards including children and young people who are not at risk and potentially missing those who are at greatest risk of harm or neglect. A tighter definition of vulnerability would ensure that those children and young people who are at greatest risk of harm or neglect could be targeted more precisely and resources put in place to support their families more intensively. For instance, of the 97,000 children (10% of the population aged 0–17) in Scotland who have a multi-agency plan, which is a good indicator of heightened risk, only around 450 have been attending a hub, which is approximately 0.5% of all children with multi-agency plans. This is the population that statutory services would wish to focus their attention on and provide most support to, including financial support where poverty is also a factor. This is all the more pressing as the Scottish Government predict that the number of vulnerable children, defined as those at risk of harm or neglect, will rise due to the additional pressures placed on families and communities caused by COVID-19. This type of support is vital; however, it should not replace the wider structural focus on reducing and preventing poverty. A dual approach is required.

In considering the increased pressure on families, the Scottish Government's 'key workers and vulnerable children' guidance makes just fleeting reference to the importance of income and higher costs of living, even though it is these two factors that put greatest strain on families. It does not prioritise increasing family incomes, or reducing family costs, when the evidence shows that to do so would reduce, not only poverty, but also the increased risk of neglect and harm (Courtin et al, 2019). When these guidelines were put in place, Scotland was in an immediate emergency response to COVID-19, and so a broadbrush approach may have been understandable; however, after several months, with partners across the voluntary, public and academic sectors petitioning a shift in practice based on evidence, it's time for the existing approach to change.

### **The conflation of poverty and adversity**

The conflation of poverty and adversity in the COVID-19 response in Scotland is best exemplified in the administration of free school meals (FSMs). The sole criterion for eligibility to FSMs, outwith the universal entitlement for Primary

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Years 1–3 (P1-P3), is low income; there are no other conditions or circumstances that entitle children and young people to FSMs. In Scotland it is estimated that 24% of children (230,000 children each year) live in poverty. There are no data provided on the number of children eligible for a FSM in Scotland, although 260,750 pupils were registered for one in 2019. It should be noted that this figure includes those children with a universal entitlement due to being in P1-P3, but does not include those in P4-S6 who may be entitled to a free school meal due to low income but who are not registered for one. The Scottish Government statistics do not provide a breakdown on total numbers of pupils eligible or registered based on low income entitlement alone. In 2019 it is estimated that the total free school eligibility based on the low income criterion is approximately 124,000 (Scottish Government, 2019).

The evidence-based response to an eligibility based exclusively on low income is to increase income, for example, by provide cash to families of children eligible for FSMs. This would also be the most dignified and non-stigmatising response. This argument was put forward, and a letter to this effect was signed by more than 100 children’s charities, faith groups, academics, think tanks, poverty campaigners and trade, and delivered to the Scottish Government. Up to the point of writing (mid-June 2020) this has not been the universal approach taken across Scotland. The Scottish Government’s guidance on ‘key workers and vulnerable children’, emphasises that local authorities are responsible for their own systems for supporting the families of children who receive FSMs during the coronavirus crisis and, it says little about a cash-first method of delivery (Scottish Government, 2020a). It has not required local authorities to have a standardised response.

Also as part of the emergency crisis measures, the Scottish Government announced a £70 million ‘Food Fund’ of which £15 million is ring-fenced to be allocated to local authorities to support the delivery of their FSM provision. The ‘Food Fund’ guidance emphasises that this £15 million is being given to local authorities to support families whose children are eligible for FSMs, stating that the entire households’ food needs are to be considered and not just the child’s, and it emphasises the importance of a cash-first approach (Scottish Government, 2020b). The guidance states that a straightforward way of doing this would be to identify eligible families using school clothing grant data and make the payment into the same bank account used for that. Eligibility for the school clothing grant varies by local authority and can be wider than that for FSMs; however, the families eligible for SCG undoubtedly also have a low-income and so this broader approach would be more inclusive. It has the added advantage of requiring no new data or administrative processes. Although the Scottish Government guidance emphasises a cash-first approach,

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it again leaves authorities to formulate a local response; there is no standardised pan-Scotland approach.

In spite of the evidence supporting a cash-first approach, many local authorities have imposed a nonmonetary approach to FSM eligibility suggesting that they do not trust families to buy food for their children if they were to give them money. For an eligibility based on income, only 10 out of 32 local authorities' first response is to give money to families to replace FSMs, correct as of 12 May 2020.

Table 1 gives an overview of how each local authority in Scotland is meeting its statutory duty to provide low income children and young people with their FSM eligibility in light of school closures. What is clear is that there is no uniform approach and there is a lack of consistency. Some local authorities have changed their approach, e.g. from collection or delivery of food to vouchers or cash payments (see for example, <https://www.inverclyde.gov.uk/news/2020/apr/changes-to-free-school-lunch-provision>). While this is welcome, it is not always due to increasing levels of trust in families living in poverty on how they spend money, but because they could no longer guarantee food provision. The frequency of payments also varies, with payments being made weekly, fortnightly or even monthly. In exploring local authority websites there were not always links to FSM applications, which will make applying for FSMs difficult for those who may now be eligible due to coronavirus. Alarming, some local authorities have a March 2020 cut-off date for eligibility to apply for FSMs, which means that the children of those who lose their jobs, or who move to a new area, for example because they are escaping abuse, will not be entitled to receive a FSM at all. This may extend to any holiday provision that is implemented during the pandemic.

There is variation in the daily amounts given to replace FSMs. This is especially important as local authorities have received additional funding from the Food Fund to ensure there is a whole household and not just a child-only approach. The amounts vary from a low of £2 to a high of £4 per child per day. Another aspect to note is those whose approach is to deliver meals to children's homes. This approach levies an additional and unnecessary financial and environment cost as it requires transport, drivers and fuel. One local authority requires eligible families to opt-in to the FSM replacement provision even though families would have been eligible prior to coronavirus. Of those local authorities that provide vouchers, some are providing vouchers for a frozen foods shop which does not have a large number of shops across Scotland. This incurs additional costs in travel to the shop, in storing the food and in defrosting and cooking the food. It also precludes the purchase of fresh fruit and vegetables for children.

**Table 1:**  
**Local authority responses to free school meal eligibility during COVID-19**

<b>Local authority</b>	<b>How fulfilling eligibility</b>	<b>Amount (daily)</b>
Aberdeen City	Supermarket vouchers issued fortnightly	£2.50
Aberdeenshire	Cash – paid every 4 weeks	£2.50
Angus	Cash – paid fortnightly	unknown
Argyll and Bute	Meal collection or delivery	---
Clackmannanshire	Cash – paid fortnightly	£2.30
Dumfries and Galloway	Choice between collection, delivery or fortnightly cash	£3.50
Dundee	Cash – paid weekly	£2.25
East Ayrshire	Meal delivery each day	---
East Dunbartonshire	Farmfoods card uploaded with £20 each week	£4.00
East Lothian	Weekly food package delivery	---
East Renfrewshire	Weekly food package delivery	---
Edinburgh	Cash – paid fortnightly	£2.25
Eilean Siar	Still deciding between delivery, collection, vouchers, cash	unknown
Falkirk	Collect meal from school	---
Fife	Cash – paid weekly	£2.30
Glasgow City	Farmfoods card uploaded with £20 each fortnight	£2.00
Highland	e vouchers	£3.00
Inverclyde	Cash – paid fortnightly	£2.50
Midlothian	Cash for families with secondary and primary children/ food delivery for those with primary children only	unknown
Moray	Supermarket vouchers issued fortnightly	£2.50
North Ayrshire	Weekly food package delivery (opt-in basis)	---
North Lanarkshire	£20 PayPoint voucher per week	£4.00
Orkney Islands	Reimbursement	£3.00

*Continued*

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**Table 1:** *Continued*

<b>Local authority</b>	<b>How fulfilling eligibility</b>	<b>Amount (daily)</b>
Perth and Kinross	Cash – paid fortnightly	unknown
Renfrewshire	Cash – paid fortnightly	£2.25
Scottish Borders	Collect packed lunch daily or supermarket e-voucher	£2.50
Shetland Islands	Cash	unknown
South Ayrshire	Food box on a weekly basis	---
South Lanarkshire	£30 PayPoint voucher per fortnight	£3.00
Stirling	Packed lunches delivered twice a week	---
West Dunbartonshire	Collect lunch daily or receive Farmfoods voucher	£2.45
West Lothian	Collect meal from school	---

*Data Sources: Local authority websites. Accurate as of 12 May 2020*

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Good practice comes from those local authorities giving families choice over the provision of FSMs, including an option to receive cash, and those whose approach automatically offers cash. Good practice also comes from those local authorities who have genuinely responded to local need. For example, following a campaign by local councillors, Highland Council and the Post Office introduced a new scheme to allow parents in rural areas to exchange major supermarket vouchers for money to spend in local stores, as some parents were facing long car journeys to make use of the vouchers (Macaulay, 2020). Yet, even the councillors who implemented the scheme to exchange the vouchers for cash, gave caveats that some parents might not be trusted to buy food for their children (Macaulay, 2020).

There are no publicly available data on monitoring and evaluating local authorities' differing approaches to providing FSMs; for example, no data are collected on the cost of the different schemes, taking all factors, such as transport, into account. Furthermore, there is no breakdown in relation to local authorities' usual spend in this area, how they have reallocated their existing funds or whether they are still contracted to pay suppliers who may no longer be able to provide a service. Without access to these data it is not possible to provide effective scrutiny of local authority approaches.

What many of these nonmonetary responses fail to understand is that the sole criterion of eligibility to FSMs is a lack of income. Why are so many local authorities reluctant to give families living in poverty cash? The answer lies in the prejudice that poor parents are poor parents. There is an engrained idea that any increased income to families living in poverty would not be spent on feeding their children. There remains the perception of the undeserving poor; the belief that parents living in poverty cannot be trusted. In suggesting that parents would be neglectful of their children's food needs if their income were increased conflates poverty with adversity.

There are of course children and young people who are at risk of neglect and harm, for example those who have child protection issues or experience domestic abuse, and who are also eligible for FSMs. There is a number of such families who may well benefit from a non-monetary response to their FSM eligibility. However, how to deliver their FSM provision should be taken as a separate decision. Local authorities know who their at-risk children are, these are children who require dedicated support, in addition to their FSM, especially during the time of coronavirus. It is important not to conflate their adversity or vulnerability with their poverty.

Families should be offered a choice in how they receive their FSM provision, with the first option being a direct cash payment. Furthermore, young people aged 16–17 could have the eligibility paid directly to them via an increase in their EMA entitlement, should they receive it. There are different options, and a blend of options, that can be utilised to afford families choice, dignity and respect.

## **The impacts of a nonmonetary response**

The main impact of a nonmonetary response to providing the FSM eligibility is that children and young people may not take up their eligibility. The techniques and behaviours that children, young people and their families employ to ensure they are not identified or defined as living in poverty, as set out earlier in this paper, will come to the fore, e.g. the masking or hiding of a stigmatised identity. This is likely to lead to lower uptake of FSM eligibility. In Port Talbot there was a 300% increase (from 1000 to 4000 pupils) in the uptake of FSMs during the coronavirus pandemic when the provision changed from food collection to cash (Neath Port Talbot Council, 2020). In England, 40% of households with children (aged 8–16) eligible for FSMs report they have not yet received a FSM substitute (Loopstra, 2020); similar data are not publicly available for Scotland. If local authorities want children

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and families to access their legal entitlements, then they should provide a cash option.

Food insecurity during coronavirus is endemic. Families have reduced incomes, the costs of food and other goods and services have increased, supermarkets have lower levels of stock, the cheaper brands are the first to be sold out, close to sell-by date reduced items are not as readily available and home deliveries have been protected for those who are shielding, leaving some people having to travel distances to supermarkets. This is being reflected in the requests for help the third sector are experiencing. For example, Aberlour children's charity have recorded a 1,400% increase in applications for financial assistance from families, with 90% of these applications being for food (Aberlour, 2020). Children and families are experiencing higher and deeper levels of poverty and what they need is more money.

## **Conclusions**

Poverty and inequality have their origins in political processes and it is within the gift of governments to prevent and reduce them. Poverty and inequality have pernicious effects on children and their families and can lead (but not inevitably) to increased levels of ACEs. Poverty and inequality are far more pervasive than ACEs, yet are often misunderstood or ignored, particularly by the structures that cause them. The current focus on ACEs in Scotland takes no cognisance of their relationship with poverty and inequality. In fact, adversity is being conflated with poverty, which has consequences for children and their families. This first conclusion of this paper is that poverty and inequality, rather than ACEs, should be the focus of policy action in Scotland.

By advancing that government action should focus on poverty more extensively than ACEs is not to deny the magnitude of the effects that high levels of adversity have on children's lives. It is critical to recognise that children at risk of harm, neglect or other adversities do require a dedicated service provision to support and nourish them and allow them to flourish. However, ACEs only look at adversity within the family and not across society, which is problematic. This allows poverty and adversity to become conflated and confused policy and practice responses ensue. Not prioritising increasing family incomes and reducing family costs risks exacerbating both poverty, through non take-up of entitlements due to stigma, and the adverse experiences public authorities seek to tackle. Alleviating families' poverty with cash responses, for example for FSM entitlement, would free up other resources to focus on families requiring more extensive non-financial support.



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The second conclusion of this paper is that children cannot be decontextualised from their families; there should be a whole family approach to offering them financial or other support. This is little acknowledged in the ACEs approach which locates the family at the centre of children's adversity. It is more reflected in national poverty approaches but not necessarily in local implementations of these. An example is the emphasis on offering cash and taking a whole family approach in the guidance the Scottish Government issued on the use of the Food Fund. However, at the local authority level, there has been varying approaches in the delivery of the fund. This would be much easier to scrutinise if comprehensive data on FSM uptake and on the costs of taking different local approaches during COVID-19 were made publicly available.

The necessary swiftness of the initial emergency response to COVID-19 did not, understandably, take time to draw on the research evidence on the best way to support families living in poverty. However, time is moving on and now is the time to take stock, to evaluate practice, to take on board expert opinion, including those with lived experience, and to consider a change of approach. This is especially so as FSM provision will continue through the 2020 summer holidays. It is preferable that a national approach to the value, and to the right to choose a cash-based option for receiving a FSM replacement, be implemented. At present there is a differential approach that does not always trust families or offer them a dignified response.

There is a precedent for a national minimum standard to a poverty issue to be applied in schools. Prior to May 2018, the value of school clothing grants (SCG) across local authorities was variable, with a low of £20 in one to a high of £110 in another, and they were often paid in stigmatising vouchers (Treanor, 2018). Following a voluntary agreement between the Scottish Government and local authorities, the SCG was standardised across all local authorities to the value of £100, paid in cash. A similarly standardised, national approach to FSM provision is needed during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure equity and dignity for children and their families.

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