Austerity, mental health and child neglect: the perfect storm

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Children need parents to take care of them, give them cuddles and enough food; I was always hungry – I never knew what a chocolate biscuit was until I went into foster care. Some children don’t know they are being neglected and not ever getting a hug is being neglected. If you’ve never had one you just don’t know. Not getting loved – you’re on your own.

Sometimes no-one believes you or no-one comes to your house to see what’s going on so no-one might know or can tell from the outside.
Neglect is a public health issue

Survey of 1,582 children in the general population in UK aged eight to 16

Figure 3: Have you ever known a child who...?

Key points

1. Neglect seriously affects mental wellbeing.
2. Austerity has direct effects on children and families and impacts disproportionately on those who are already deprived.
3. Child neglect is associated with poverty.
4. Poverty affects the mental health of adults.
5. Poor parental mental health is associated with neglect.
6. Early intervention is essential to reduce neglect.
7. Chronic neglect requires long-term intensive support.
8. Austerity has resulted in cuts across services.
Neglected children...

- have some of the poorest long term health and developmental outcomes
- are at high risk of accidents
- are vulnerable to sexual abuse
- are likely to have insecure attachment patterns
- are less likely than other children to:
  - develop the characteristics associated with resilience
  - or have access to wider protective factors

### Effects of neglect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of effect</th>
<th>Infants 0-2</th>
<th>Early Childhood</th>
<th>The School Years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>poor growth/intellectual capacity under stimulation nappy rash, infections, hospital attendances failure to thrive</td>
<td>short stature, dirty, unkempt delay in learning new skills learning slow and painful language delay</td>
<td>severe educational deficits: learning disabilities, poor problem solving poor reading, writing and maths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour</td>
<td>withdrawn, lethargic, depressed self stimulating behaviour e.g. rocking</td>
<td>lacking social skills either aggressive or withdrawn indiscriminate friendliness</td>
<td>disruptive/overactive in class desperate for attention few friends overcompensation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>no learned trust</td>
<td>shame and self doubt lack of confidence and expectation of failure poor self concept</td>
<td>encopresis/eneuresis guilt/self blame self harming disturbed eating patterns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(adapted from Skuse 1994)
Austerity hits the poor most

‘It is only reasonable to expect that the welfare reforms will hit the poorest parts of Britain hardest. After all, one of the reasons why some places are so poor is that they have so many people claiming benefits. On the other hand, the welfare reforms extend well beyond just those who are out-of-work to include large swathes of the employed population as well. So just how big will the impact be on different places? And just how much harder will the reforms hit the poorer parts of Britain than more prosperous areas?’

(Beatty and Fothergill, 2013, p.4)

‘Estimates suggest that almost 60% of welfare reform reductions fall on households where somebody works, and that reductions are greater for working households than non-working households’

(Wilson et al. 2013, p5)

In a survey on neglect of 1,552 professionals from all key disciplines 66% of those who responded gave ‘greater poverty / deprivation in the area’ as their top reason to account for increases in suspected child neglect

(Burgess et al. 2014).
Changes to the tax and benefit systems disproportionately hit the most vulnerable families. The negative impact is perversely greater for families with more vulnerabilities, particularly affecting families with four or more vulnerabilities present in their lives:

- Worklessness – no parent in the family is in work;
- Housing – the family lives in poor quality and/or overcrowded housing;
- Qualifications – no parent in the family has any academic or vocational qualifications;
- Mental health – the mother has mental health problems;
- Illness/disability – at least one parent has a limiting long-standing illness, disability or infirmity;
- Low income – the family has low income (below 60% of the median);
- Material deprivation – the family cannot afford a number of food and clothing items.

(Reed 2012, p.x)

There are also inequalities in access to the routes out of welfare dependency.

Suggested solutions, such as moving into employment or moving area, can be seriously hampered by lack of supply of employment and low housing stocks in some areas and are especially blocked to parents of neglected children, who typically lack qualifications and are affected by a range of factors that impair their capacity to find and sustain paid employment.
Not all parents living in poverty neglect their children, but there is an association between poverty and neglect which can be attributed to a complex interaction of factors exacerbated by living in poverty (NSPCC 2008, Spencer and Baldwin 2005).

To parent effectively in situations of poor housing, meagre income, lack of local resources and limited educational and employment prospects requires a high level of organisation and determination:

‘...parents who...have very limited parenting skills are often attempting to meet the needs of their child in a context that even the most competent parents would find challenging.’

Horwath 2007: p. 38.

It’s really hard to manage on the money even if you’re working. If you’re a single parent with one child you are better off working, but if you have more than one child you’re not.

Our area is not one which you could let the kids play out by themselves. One park has a warden, which is fine, but others are strewn with needles and broken glass and teenagers often use the parks at night. We also have to move into areas where we don’t have family or friends.

(Burgess et. al 2014)
The parks are often shut or have signs saying “no ball games” on the green bits – children have to play in the road.

If you’re on benefits, even if you’ve always worked in the past, you’re treated like scum.

Please don’t judge my parents, just because they are struggling doesn’t mean they are bad...

The Government needs to listen and sometimes even to angry people as there could be really good reasons underneath about why people are angry.
Poverty affects mental health

‘Key conclusions
Austerity policies have damaging psychological costs. Mental health problems are being created in the present, and further problems are being stored for the future. We have identified five ‘Austerity Ailments’. These are specific ways in which austerity policies impact on mental health:

1. Humiliation and shame
2. Fear and distrust
3. Instability and insecurity
4. Isolation and loneliness
5. Being trapped and powerless’

(McGrath et. al 2015, p1)

Association with child protection

- Of 2,248 referrals to children’s social care found that parental mental illness was recorded in 10.4% of referrals.
- Following an initial assessment, parental mental illness was recorded in 16.9% of cases.
- Parental mental illness was identified in 25% of cases coming to a child protection conference and in 43% of cases where children are the subject of care proceedings.
- Children of parents with mental health difficulties are at greater risk of experiencing health, social and/or psychological problems.

(Brophy et.al. 2003; Cleaver et. al 2004; Farmer and Owen 1995).
The best kind of help is what some family projects are able to do for us - that is, understand our problems and talk over the important things we can do for our children. And also help us with practical things like housing and sorting out our bills. Some courses they lay on can also be good, like the Parenting Courses, when you meet other people in the same situation as yourself and learn how to have routines and be a less uptight parent.

(Burgess et. al 2015)
Services

- The general public want services for families to be funded.
- 62% per cent want projects which support families before problems get worse,
- 47% per cent want health-based services
- 42% school-based services and 41% preventive services.
  (Burgess et. al 2012)

It is essential to offer

- early intervention to:
  - support parenting;
  - promote attachment;
  - address low income;
  - deal with poor housing;
  - offer additional support for children.
‘Managed dependency’

- The vast majority of parents rely on the assistance of others.
- Parents whose children are neglected tend to have no-one to turn to for support.
- Practitioner fears about parents becoming ‘too dependent’ can lead to episodic patterns of support.
- Therefore, instead, plan to provide long-term support in a purposeful and authoritative manner.

(Tanner & Turney 2003)

And yet services are being cut

- All professional groups thought that spending cuts will make it more difficult to intervene in the future.
- 35% thought spending cuts have made their situation more difficult (up from 29% in 2012)
- 43 per cent think it will be more difficult in the future.
- Social workers hit hardest by public spending cuts:
  - 65% saying such cuts have made it more difficult to intervene.
  - 73% think public spending cuts will make it more difficult to intervene in future.
- 52% of the police officers say spending cuts will make it more difficult to intervene in cases of suspected child neglect.

(Burgess et. al 2014)
Discussion

1. In your setting, what connections have you seen between austerity, trauma and child neglect?
2. In your setting, what can you do to help ameliorate the impact of this perfect storm upon parents and children?
3. Is it time to adopt a more explicit public health approach to the issue of child neglect, and if so, what would it look like?


