

“I’m not sure our current service offer addresses all of the young dads’ issues around isolation and loneliness and actually, you know, what’s been a strength of the [young dads] project beforehand has been the fact that we do have these groups where young men can come together.”

– **Following Young Fathers Further study**

Support services had to adapt their provision in response to the pandemic, but sadly the shift to online all too often meant that those who needed the support most were not able to access it. Here, there was arguably a need for greater intervention from the UK government to ensure that action around digital inclusion was prioritised as we all shifted online at pace. Interestingly, this was something highlighted by those with direct experiences of poverty from the very outset of the pandemic, showing the value of doing more to engage with and learn from the expertise of experience (Goldstraw et al., 2021). The following section explores the social isolation and loneliness that participants often felt due to limited opportunities for support from either formal or informal networks.

Social isolation and loneliness

Social and community life has been particularly adversely affected during the pandemic (Cameron et al., 2021). It is important to recognise that poverty is itself a driver of isolation, and so even prior to the pandemic, many participants spoke of being isolated. The circumstances of the pandemic only extended and increased these isolation risks. Scullion et al. (forthcoming 2022b) note how, in their study with veterans, for those with limited family support or contact pre-pandemic, the support provided by peers through local veteran-specific networks (both formal and informal) was (pre-Covid) vital. However, the suspension of such forms of support due to Covid-19 restrictions had impacted significantly on a number of participants:

“I’m constantly up, constantly down. It’s affected us massively. Obviously, the Covid’s affecting us massively because of not being able to get out and go to these Breakfast Clubs [Armed Forces and Veterans’ Breakfast Clubs]. I don’t really have any mates, but the mates that I do have I can’t go and see because obviously, we’re in lockdown.” – **Forces in Mind Trust study**

Nearly all of our projects reported that the pandemic had altered formal and informal support networks and coping strategies. While those reliant on formal support services as described above struggled without them, many families on low incomes struggled without established kinship support networks too. This is particularly the case for single parents who often had to shoulder the burden of the pandemic alone (Clery et al., 2021). Almost all studies (and especially the Caring Without Sharing and Benefit

Changes and Larger Families projects) found that the introduction of support bubbles helped to ease this sense of isolation, which had an especially positive impact on single parents' mental health and wellbeing. It is important to note, however, that certain policies, such as the rule of six, or the lack of support bubbles for single parents prior to June 2020, had negative impacts on some family types. A 'one-size fits all' approach is therefore not appropriate, and recognising diversity in family types is essential in policy responses to ensure that families' diverse needs are taken into account.

Conclusions and policy implications

Our research synthesis evidence shows that there were significant mental health impacts of the pandemic, which often exacerbated pre-existing mental health issues. The role of informal networks and kinship support via family and friends was essential, but at times (especially during the first lockdown and associated restrictions) these were unavailable to parents when they needed them. Formal support via services was often difficult to access, and was all too often inadequate to meet the needs of families on a low income.

From our collated evidence base, we jointly recommend:

- ✔ Policy interventions that look holistically at families' circumstances in order to understand the complex and interacting factors affecting low-income families – especially between job security, health and childcare needs
- ✔ Recognition of the links between low income/financial insecurity and mental ill health for both adults and children, and targeted support to address this
- ✔ Sustainable funding for non-kinship community support
- ✔ A focus on the protective role social security could and should play in preventing hardship, and in doing so, improving the nation's mental health

There is a pressing need to do much more to acknowledge the relationship between poverty, income insecurity and mental (ill) health, and the protective role that could be played by social security here. This should be part of an ambitious mental health strategy that seeks to improve the mental health of all of us. Doing just that requires acknowledging that action on mental health needs to include action on income security.