



Changing Realities: life on a low income during the cost of living crisis

**CAROLINE, ELLA, EMMA, JO, KIM, SHIRLEY and TAYYABA
from CHANGING REALITIES**

*A girl playing at her family's rented home in
Weston-super-Mare.*

It is two and a half years since the first Covid lockdown, and while we are no longer living under emergency measures, the sense of emergency has not gone away. As the cost of living races ahead of stagnant benefit incomes, parents and carers on a low income are coming together to document their experiences and call for urgent change. What were families on a low income facing going into the pandemic? What was it like to take part in the Covid Realities research programme? And what do participants hope to achieve through the new project, Changing Realities?

Covid Realities ran from April 2020 to June 2022. Each of us, along with more than 150 other parents and carers, documented the everyday realities of living on a low income during the pandemic. Together, we made a powerful case for change. We are carrying on this work with Changing Realities, which will involve parents and carers from across the UK documenting their everyday struggles to get by during the cost of living crisis. But we also want to change things, so the project includes online workshops and discussion groups, and support to speak to the media about what needs to change and why. We want to make sure the expertise of experience is included in the debate on poverty and the current crisis.

This article is by participants who spoke at a plenary session at the Social Policy Association (SPA) annual conference in July.

Jo

I joined the Covid Realities project as I had just carried out a survey with CPAG about being a lone parent on social security and they invited me to take part. The cost of living was rising and they were collecting information on how this impacted families on a low income. The Covid Realities project sounded interesting and maybe, a possibility to be heard... This felt so important as the days rolled into weeks and beyond. I remain ever grateful that I said yes to being a participant.

Emma

Four months into Covid I was feeling helpless, frustrated and at a huge loss with every aspect of life. I decided to Google a forum where I could just vent every emotion I was feeling this particular day. I came across Covid Realities and signed up! I sat in my room and vented everything I needed to anonymously. Over the coming weeks this became a regular occurrence as it was the only way to clear my thoughts in order to sleep and function. A wife and mum to three beautiful children stuck in a nightmare, we were at the height of my daughter's illness which could kill her at any moment. We were doing everything we could to keep her safe and that meant neither of us were able to work.

Taking part

What was it like taking part? What changed? What stayed the same?

Shirley

The sense of camaraderie was superb. Whilst the pandemic threw into stark relief how life can change in an instant through circumstances beyond your control, we knew we were not alone. The 'Big Question of The Week' gave real-time opportunities to highlight injustice within current systems. For example, those on legacy benefits were ineligible for the much needed, albeit temporary, £20 per week uplift to universal credit, losing out on an additional £1,040. Then Chancellor Rishi Sunak extended the lifeline for an additional six months, but it was still withdrawn in October 2021. Being part of Covid Realities felt like our concerns were finally being taken more seriously by the Establishment because we had the backing of academics.

Caroline

The Covid Realities project became an evening I looked forward to during the pandemic. The project gave me a sense of community. The people got me, we got each other. We never had to explain ourselves, it brought the four nations together as one voice.

Exactly what I was hoping for when I signed up, I have met some great people and developed new friendships. Getting together over Zoom doing zines, writing short stories, planning how we will speak at events, in blogs and podcasts to name but a few, as well as all the media reports. We had a laugh and some serious discussion. I have become more confident with the knowledge I can speak clearly about how poverty impacts on us, our families and the wider community. This confidence has driven me to want more, to want better for our communities. I signed up to do my community development [qualification] and hope to graduate in November.

Ella

At first, I thought Covid Realities would be a one-off piece of social research and didn't expect it to snowball into the amazing support group which it became. The diaries became an outlet of raw expression, which were an intimate dialogue between myself and my thoughts when everything around felt so dark. The diaries helped to frame some perspective for my feelings. I have loved the 'Big Ideas Groups' and the workshops since. The trust between participants and researchers strengthened, and the team as a collective became unbreakable. I never imagined we would have come as far as we are now together, and it is heartwarming and lovely to see.

Covid Realities participants used a number of outlets for expressing themselves, including through zines such as this one by Embad.





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A woman collecting food from a local food bank in south-west London.

Kim

Taking part in Covid Realities was a true lifeline for me and I don't say that lightly. It has been a life changing experience. Covid Realities gave me a place to unload all my darkest worries and frustrations privately in the online diaries, and online Zoom meetings were offered where the researchers created a safe, secure space for participants to come together 'face to face' and discuss the issues we were all facing without the fear of judgement. What started as a group of strangers chatting about being forgotten by the system, and the effects that was having on all aspects of our lives from our children to our mental health, became a community that supported and built each other up. In turn we became determined to have our voices heard and work towards changes in the system for the better. The project facilitated many ways for our voices to be heard, from media workshops helping us prepare for media interviews on television, radio and in newspapers, to building a zine as a collective along with many other experiences. The project ensured that there was a way for everyone to express how they were feeling and the reforms we wanted to see.

Tayyaba

I have a voice but I realised I need a platform to have my voice heard. Because of that, I joined Covid Realities. Participating in this research meant my voice was heard on many platforms. I shared and discussed ideas with other participants. I did Zoom sessions on 'Big Ideas', zine making, blogs, articles in newspapers and a conference. All of these opportunities made me realise there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Jo

My sister died of Covid very early on in the pandemic, and the positive impact the community element of the project had on the process of my grief was priceless. I was given space to share experiences, it helped a lot. I was incredibly isolated with my young son, really struggling as I lost my job just before the first lockdown and we had only just begun recovering from some significant, traumatic experiences. Taking part in the project gave me a focus, and sharing collective experiences with other participants was immensely comforting. I love the diversity, our sharedness and the creativity which flowed from the project.

Emma

Taking part in Covid Realities has genuinely saved me. My mental health hit rock bottom. I was failing as a wife and a mother because of this pandemic and there was nothing I could do to stop it from getting worse. Stuck in a nightmare knowing that the painful hungry feeling you felt was now a part of normal life, the children were too young to understand. Every day was a struggle and a fight and I was running out of energy. Covid Realities relit the fire in my belly to make things better or at least try! Being a part of what I like to call a family, with no judgement and more understanding of the situation than anyone else I knew. Being a part of Covid Realities helped me bring my voice back and, better yet, I was listened to! I was given many opportunities and I always made time for them all. It was therapeutic and has become a huge part of my life which I am very proud of.



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Changing Realities

What do you hope to change in the future?

Shirley

By participating in the Changing Realities project as the cost of living crisis looms large, I hope that we can further influence the government on the judicious application of thoughtful, effective policies informed by those with lived experience. Our collective voice is needed so that social security is repositioned as a vital investment in a healthy, functioning, modern, compassionate society where the stability and survival of all citizens is ensured, enabling them to flourish without shame or stigma. Changing Realities is ideally suited to the task and is my opportunity to continue campaigning and inspiring others to share their lived experiences. A safe place to call home, enough to eat and a sufficient income to live on are fundamental human rights.

Caroline

Poverty is still a barrier for me: many employers seek people with experience, something I don't have formally, yet I can't afford to volunteer or cut my hours back. I feel trapped. How are we to ever attain better jobs, better communities when the system can't enable us to achieve this without being further harmed by deeper poverty? I guess what I hope to achieve through Changing Realities is that I can 'change my reality', improve my learning and experience and then share my knowledge and motivate others struggling to take part and to use their voice in the best way they can. I had previously heard about participatory work but it wasn't all that common; it's still a learning exercise for us all. As a person with lived experience I am able to mould how this practice is viewed, educate those running these events and hopefully see participation evolve into co-production where those with lived experience become leaders of this practice.

Ella

I really like the dynamic of the group and feel everything as it stood before will be great in Changing Realities. It felt really therapeutic to also take part in zine making as doing physical artwork was not something I had done in years.



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A father and son living in a deprived area of Halifax, Yorkshire.

Kim

The project as a whole has been wonderful to be part of. The researchers have created a space where the participants feel empowered to use their lived experiences to campaign for changes that are needed within the system. They worked to enable participants' interaction with policymakers within government and the Department for Work and Pensions, and at the SPA conference. Going forward with Changing Realities I hope that we continue to strive for reforms with the end goal of a fairer benefit system and a huge cut in poverty.

Tayyaba

One of many good things about this project is that when we put our thoughts and ideas together, policy makers are listening to us. They recognise what support we need and cannot ignore us. A change I hope to see is an end to poverty, not just temporarily, but a permanent solution. Poverty's impact is not only on adults, it has a huge impact on children physically and mentally which can be forever. I am scared to even think about it. No poverty means good health and mental wellbeing, more opportunities for education and a country where children can bloom.

Jo


I want to see us carrying out positive and measurable work to genuinely change the realities of the people on the project, and of course beyond. We cannot continue to be so accepting of being brushed off by systems and government when so many are in crisis. Is it even crisis if it is so protracted? I want to be part of raising the profile of those of us living in poverty, I hope that Changing Realities will empower us to be less invisible. We need to break the silence.



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Emma

After being there and witnessing the amazing work of Covid Realities I am genuinely excited for the new project Changing Realities. The team have worked so hard, reached so many people and made such an impact on all of us involved. When we all work together amazing things happen and we've proved that. With more opportunities I believe the impact could be even greater. As parents it is amazing to get the chance to work towards shaping the future for our children, as their security and happiness is our main goal.



We want to involve more parents and carers in Changing Realities. Visit changingrealities.org to find out more.

Covid Realities was a collaboration between the Universities of York and Birmingham, and CPAG. The project was funded by the Nuffield Foundation but the views expressed here are those of the authors and not necessarily of the Foundation. See covidrealities.org

A Covid Realities book, A Year Like No Other, is now available from Policy Press. To receive a 30 per cent discount before the end of November, enter the code POAYLNO at policy.bristoluniversitypress.co.uk/a-year-like-no-other

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