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policy and practice

The Early Warning System: how frontline evidence helps us understand the UK's social security response to COVID-19

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This article reports on the Child Poverty Action Group Early Warning System (EWS), a database of case studies representing social security issues reported directly by frontline benefits advice workers and benefit claimants. It outlines what data from the EWS can tell us about how the social security system is functioning and how it has responded during the pandemic. It further details how insights from the EWS can be used by researchers and policymakers seeking to understand the role of social security in supporting families living on a low income and in advocating for short- and longer-term policy change.

Key words social security • benefits • COVID-19 • benefits advice • Universal Credit

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Introduction

In March 2020 when the UK entered the first of three national lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK social security system was forced to respond. While a raft of new policy measures to support jobs and the economy were rolled out, including the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme and the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furlough), these were not able to fully mitigate against the sudden socioeconomic changes that resulted in large-scale redundancies and income shocks. Consequently, the number of new social security claimants rose rapidly and significantly. Between 20 March and 2 April 2020 alone, for example, 1.1 million

new Universal Credit claims were made, and the past year has subsequently seen a 98 per cent increase in the number of Universal Credit claimants – from 3 to 6 million people between March 2020 and January 2021 (DWP, 2021).

In the immediate term, the social security system had to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances and take the steps required to administer such an increase in the level of claims. However, some households struggled to gain access to the appropriate level of financial support (Summers et al, 2020; CPAG, 2020a). There were additional issues around take up, with an estimated half a million people not claiming Universal Credit at the start of the pandemic despite being eligible (Baumberg-Gieger et al, 2021).

It is important to recognise that the social security system entered the pandemic itself in poor health; with successive waves of welfare reforms and cuts leaving it ill-equipped to provide effective levels of support to families already in poverty when the pandemic began, as well as to those pushed into poverty by the pandemic (Garnham, 2020). Against this context, it is vital to understand how the social security response has unfolded as the pandemic has progressed, to assess how the system is functioning for both new and existing social security claimants. Responsive data sources updating in real-time are invaluable in this context, acting as a key resource for researchers and policymakers to identify and address systemic problems as they arise and in the longer term.

About the Early Warning System

The Early Warning System was set up in 2013 by Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in Scotland, before being made UK wide, to collect case studies about the impact of changes in the social security system on families and individuals (CPAG, 2021). CPAG is an organisation dedicated to understanding the causes and impact of child poverty and to driving forward solutions to prevent and solve child poverty.

During the pandemic, the Covid Realities research programme – a collaboration between the Universities of York and Birmingham and funded by the Nuffield Foundation – has been working in partnership with CPAG, and parents and carers, to document the experiences of families living on a low income during the pandemic. Covid Realities is designed so that parents and carers can tell us about their experiences in a number of ways including online diaries, regular participatory discussion groups, a ‘Big Question of the week’ and using arts-based methods. Alongside this participatory approach, Covid Realities and CPAG are analysing data from the EWS to understand areas of the social security system that are immediately problematic for claimants, and to explore commonalities and underlying themes across social security policies and administration. The partnership is further engaging with researchers and policymakers to communicate the experiences and needs of families living on a low income, as well as setting out recommendations for change.¹

The information gathered through the EWS comes directly from frontline sources including via the CPAG advice service, and from welfare benefits advisors, with individual case studies posted using an online form that in turn creates a data set of information (CPAG, 2021). This rapid reporting function means that detailed case information can be recorded as it is identified in real-time, generating oversight of social security policy and administrative issues as they arise.

Although the system cannot cover every change or problem occurring in the social security system, by enabling those working on the frontline of social security to

select the issues they feel are of greatest importance, the EWS ensures that recurring systemic problems as well as issues affecting claimants with particular characteristics, for example, people with no recourse to public funds, can be rapidly highlighted and potentially addressed. For example, over a number of years, evidence from the EWS has documented the nature and extent of issues with debt deductions from benefit payments, and the hardship these subsequently cause to claimants. This evidence has been shared by CPAG through briefing papers and direct engagement with the DWP, and most recently through a submission to a government consultation on ‘debt management’ (see [CPAG, 2020b](#)). Some government debt deductions were paused in the early days of the pandemic (April–June), while the repayment level at which deductions to Universal Credit are sought has since been reduced from 30 per cent to 25 per cent of a claimant’s Universal Credit income. Both these can be seen in part as an acknowledgement and response to the EWS evidence base.

The EWS highlights the value of hearing from those working directly with claimants on the issues that they feel are most salient, particularly in a rapidly changing context. There is great expertise contained within the welfare rights community, expertise that is not always adequately represented in policymaking discussions, which can privilege narrow forms of expertise (for example, academic, think tank and third sector). There is an important historical literature tracking the role of frontline workers in holding the state to account (see, for example, [London and Edinburgh Weekend Group, 1987](#); [Crossley, 2018](#)). At the same time, frontline workers can also play a part in extending state-led practices as evidenced, for example, in the extension of eligibility conditions and conditionality in some food banks ([Garthwaite, 2016](#)). Here, however, we are interested in how welfare rights advisers’ expertise can help us evaluate what is working well and not so well in the social security system and to advocate for change where needed, a role they have long played (see, for example, [Leissner, 1967](#); [Fimister, 1986](#)).

The Early Warning System and the COVID-19 UK social security response

While the EWS has been assisting policymakers and practitioners for over eight years at the time of writing, this unique data source has been particularly helpful in understanding the social security response during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given its unique and real-time characteristics, the EWS is well-positioned to enable practitioners, researchers and policymakers to understand how the social security system is responding to the needs of new and existing claimants, and what this means practically for those experiencing the system first-hand.

This evidence base has been mobilised during the pandemic through CPAG’s publication of regular ‘Mind the Gaps’ and ‘Falling through the Net’ briefings. These briefings, which have been widely disseminated among senior civil servants and politicians, have provided detailed summaries of social security system issues and have directly enabled rapid engagement with policymakers ([CPAG 2020a; 2021](#)). What the EWS has highlighted clearly is that the stresses and strains within the social security system that pre-existed COVID-19 have been amplified over the past year. Problems inherent within the claims process and relating to payment adequacy and conditionality are now happening to larger numbers of people. We now summarise some key themes emerging from the EWS data over the past year, providing case examples from the EWS itself.

Getting by on social security payments

Cases submitted to the EWS suggest that problems relating to the adequacy of social security payments have been further exacerbated by the pandemic (CPAG, 2020a). This is despite the £20 uplift applied to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits from April 2020 onwards, highlighting just how difficult life for families for whom social security is a key source of income has been and continues to be.

Costs for families living on a low income have increased during the pandemic as a result of stay-at-home rules that have created extra expenses relating to homeschooling, and higher food and heating bills. For example,

Self-employed single dad in real mess due to claiming Universal Credit following lockdown and losing his Tax Credits... His expenses have increased during lockdown – he couldn't get the school meals his daughter was entitled to without reapplying. His anxiety has made him worry even more, as he has been having chest pains.

Alongside these increased costs, restrictions have meant that families cannot employ some of their usual strategies to budget on a low income, for example, visiting friends and family for meals or using charity shops for clothing and toys (Brewer and Patrick, 2021). At the same time, while some finance companies provided payment holidays and homeowners were able to take a break from mortgage payments, for much of the pandemic the government has continued to deduct debt repayments from social security payments leading to further hardship. Indeed, not all social security claimants benefited from any pause in deductions at all, and for many the suspension of recovery of some debts resulted in other deductions being increased so they were no better off:

Single mum of one, with mental health issues, didn't benefit at all from the suspension in deductions because the Council Tax deduction increased from £15.86 per month to £95 per month.

Two fifths of all households claiming Universal Credit are subject to some form of debt deduction, as are two thirds of households who started their claim at the beginning of the pandemic, most commonly due to advance payments taken out to cope with the five week wait (Patrick and Lee, 2021) and this is reflected in the hardship noted by advisors in submissions to the EWS (CPAG, 2020a).

The £20 uplift

As a result of benefit freezes between 2010 and 2013, followed by a 1 per cent increase for the subsequent three years, key benefits such as Universal Credit and Employment Support Allowance were at least 9 per cent below what they would have been if uprated according to the Consumer Price Index since 2010 coming into the pandemic (Brien et al, 2021). Families have highlighted that rather than providing additional or disposable income, the £20 uplift has simply helped to cover some of the deficit resulting from the existing low rate of payments and that payment levels remain inadequate despite the extra money available (Power et al, 2020; Griffiths et al, 2020; Summers et al, 2021).

It is also clear that some families have not benefited from the £20 uplift and additionally, using a flat rate of increase means that households with more occupants, such as families with children, are disadvantaged compared to single person households (Brien et al, 2021). The EWS has also had cases submitted where families have become subject to the benefit cap because of their receipt of the £20 uplift.

The restricting of the uplift to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credits has meant that households in receipt of legacy benefits such as Employment Support Allowance have not been provided with the same increase in financial support (CPAG, 2020a). Following blanket government advice to claim Universal Credit as the first UK lockdown began in earnest, the EWS was able to highlight that some families who made the move were worse off, which in conjunction with evidence from other organisations, led directly to a change in government advice (CPAG, 2020a). This is a clear example of the utility of the EWS and its potential to directly inform and impact on policy.

The claims process and conditionality

Inherent problems in social security claims processes have been further compounded by the pandemic. The EWS has received cases relating to new claimants struggling to access payments due to the digital by default set-up of Universal Credit, leading to payment delays and hardship (CPAG, 2020a) – a pre-existing problem now potentially impacting on larger numbers of people as the number of claims grows. The Universal Credit initial assessment period has left many families struggling to survive until their first payment arrives:

Met an expectant mother, seven months pregnant at the food bank today, came with her partner and two year old... they've just claimed for UC and will not get their first payment until [30 days' time] so have no income until then. The wait time for UC is forcing people into using food banks until they get their first payment.

Meanwhile, identity check requirements and the habitual residence test have impacted on access to social security payments for non-UK citizens displaced as a result of international travel restrictions and lockdown (CPAG, 2020a). Again, the EWS noted that this has resulted in instances of significant hardship:

Couple awaiting an ID document from the Home Office which is needed before a UC claim may be made... Living in temporary accommodation without bedding or kitchen equipment, currently reliant on foodbank vouchers provided by social services.

The reintroduction of conditionality following a three-month suspension at the beginning of the pandemic saw an increase in EWS cases relating to stopped payments, albeit at a lower level than prior to the pandemic (CPAG, 2020a). This in itself provided evidence that the promised 'light touch' approach to work search requirements and sanctions may have been enacted, although instances of hardship remained present among those subject to sanctions (CPAG, 2020a).

The Early Warning System as evidence for policymakers

During the pandemic, evidence from the EWS has been submitted to Department for Work and Pensions serious case panels on safeguarding and Universal Credit fraud, alongside a judicial review on housing rights and a Cabinet Office call for evidence regarding ‘fairness in Government debt management’ (CPAG, 2020b). These submissions are in addition to the use of the EWS as evidence in collaborations with third sector partners, for example, Rethink and Shelter (CPAG, 2020a). EWS evidence was also used as the basis for a witness statement by CPAG in support of a judicial review challenge involving claimants who had lost their entitlement to the severe disability premium due to an incorrect decision by the DWP.

It is a recognition of the value of the EWS evidence base that it is being used directly to inform the policymaking process, however, the scope for translation into policy change equally relies on uptake of the findings by policymakers and their broader readiness to engage with evidence (Monaghan and Ingold, 2019). Many of the issues highlighted here pre-existed the pandemic and these flaws inherent in the social security system are now even harder to deny, given the growing number of affected claimants. This makes the EWS a key source of information in building an evidence base to advocate for longer-term policy change where needed.

Longer-term policy change

The real-time information provided by the EWS is key to identifying immediate priorities for improvements to social security administration, particularly at a time when multiple adaptations to existing processes have been required. It can also play a central role in longer-term policy change. What evidence from the EWS and from lived experiences during the pandemic tells us, is that flaws and inadequacies in the social security system prior to COVID-19 have been further compounded over the past year.

Alongside research focusing on lived experiences ongoing in Covid Realities, the EWS has highlighted that families were already struggling on the income provided by social security payments before the pandemic and that these experiences have been exacerbated by higher living costs from staying at home. The reality for many families is that any increase in financial support from the £20 uplift has been swallowed up by higher costs, the continuation of debt deductions and the benefit cap.

In conjunction with CPAG, the Covid Realities research programme has been able to highlight the impact of benefit deductions, the benefit cap, and the £20 uplift on families during the pandemic and to take these findings directly to policymakers via a series of project learnings and dedicated events for researchers, policymakers and politicians. Through the EWS, CPAG have further highlighted persistent issues, such as migrants experiencing difficulties meeting the habitual residence test and subsequently missing out on entitlement, and claimants with health conditions and disabilities missing out on benefit entitlement (CPAG, 2021) which will require greater attention in the coming months.

Looking ahead

The impact on mental health of welfare reforms has been well-documented prior to COVID-19 (see for example, Dwyer et al, 2018; Wickham et al, 2020). Inbuilt

mechanisms of Universal Credit administration, such as the five week wait have caused distress to claimants and have been associated with indicators of financial hardship such as food insecurity (Trussell Trust, 2019).

Food insecurity and mental health are likely to worsen during the pandemic and in the immediate aftermath, impacting on those already living in poverty (Whitehead et al, 2021) and the pandemic has further compounded health inequalities. Key risk factors for contracting COVID-19 itself relate to structural factors such as housing, and insecure and low paid employment (Marmot et al, 2020).

The economic outlook over the next year is uncertain, with job losses across sectors such as the hospitality industry and retail that could potentially impact on low wage earners who are in turn more likely to be in receipt of Universal Credit. The end of furlough in September 2021 currently also coincides with the end of the temporary uplift to Universal Credit.

The EWS has further highlighted the problematic nature of conditionality during the pandemic (CPAG, 2020a). Flexibility in the months ahead, taking account of the level of demand present in the labour market will be key to ensuring the harmful outcomes on mental health and of destitution are avoided for families already experiencing the pressures of life on a low income. Policy change focusing on the adequacy of social security payments is also needed. At the time of writing, shortly after the 2021 budget, the £20 uplift is yet to be extended to legacy benefits and will cease entirely in September 2021, potentially plunging an extra 500,000 families into poverty (JRF, 2020). Our evidence shows that the implications of this decision for families with children are stark.

Reflections on the Early Warning System

The EWS represents a complex data source which is unpredictable and expansive in terms of what information is collected. This can make traditional analysis of the EWS for research purposes a challenge, but the diverse and nuanced information provided by an evidence base made up of multiple individual case studies is equally a key benefit of working with the EWS. Since it captures any issue of relevance to contributors, the EWS is able to speak to and advocate for policy change across the social security system, rather than only providing information on selected elements.

The EWS may not pick up on some problems if there is an acceptance of those issues among advice workers, as they may not be considered worth reporting. However, a request can be made through the network of advice workers for examples on a given subject, which will show whether it is a problem that the sector is experiencing in practice. Overall then, the EWS is a non-traditional data set, but is an invaluable one all the same, especially in terms of its real-time nature.

Conclusions

In the months ahead, as the UK continues to move through the pandemic and begins to feel the economic after-effects of COVID-19, the number of people requiring access to the social security system may grow further, at least in the short term. The pandemic has already exacerbated existing systemic problems in adequacy of payments, deductions, conditionality and the claims process. With a higher number of claimants, including many who have not accessed social security previously, attention is rightly

focused on the social security system like never before. Against this context, the EWS provides crucial insight into how claimants continue to be affected by social security policies and administration, and in advocating for system improvements and policy change.

Notes

¹ See www.covidrealities.org for further information.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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