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# A rapid review of children and young people's views of poverty and welfare in the context of Universal Credit

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## Abstract

Children and young people's (CYP) life chances depend heavily on family resources. This paper reports a rapid review of qualitative/mixed method studies about Universal Credit undertaken with CYP in the UK; subsequently expanded to include additional descriptors of economic disadvantage. Sixteen studies were reviewed; narrative synthesis was used to explore themes. Most recruited CYP with experience of economic disadvantage; none explicitly reported perspectives of CYP experiencing disability or rurality. Findings show growing up in poverty has significant, negative impacts on health and well-being, causing feelings of exclusion, shame and unfairness; raising important questions about the adequacy of welfare support in the UK.

## KEYWORDS

children, health & well-being, poverty, welfare, youth

## INTRODUCTION

Universal Credit (UC) is a UK social security payment to people on low income or out of work introduced in the Welfare Reform Act 2012. UC was designed to simplify the UK benefits system and improve work incentives but has received critical attention due to it causing 'ongoing

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reductions to the incomes of some of the most economically fragile households' (Children's Society, 2017:6). In August 2022 there were over 5.5 million people claiming UC, 41% of whom were working, and over two million children lived in households receiving UC (Department for Work and Pensions, 2022).

The life chances of children and young people (CYP) depend heavily on family resources (Rivenbark et al., 2020). Compelling evidence shows even fleeting exposure to childhood poverty leads to higher risk of mortality in early adulthood (Dyer, 2019; Rod et al., 2020). Disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances represent a significant risk within children for developing poor health, including persistent mental health difficulties extending into adulthood (Wykes et al., 2021) and reduced life opportunities (Wickham et al., 2016). COVID-19 has worsened these effects (Patrick et al., 2022; Pickett et al., 2021).

Researchers at the universities of Cumbria, Newcastle and Northumbria, together with Children North East and the North East Child Poverty Commission are undertaking two pilot studies to understand CYP's views on UC and the potential impacts on health. To support this, we received funding to undertake a rapid literature review to identify UK research on this topic from Research England's Policy Support Fund (2021/22 University of Cumbria); here we report the findings. Studies on childhood poverty 'overwhelmingly draw on theories developed around adult needs and experiences' (Main, 2018:1127); we focussed on the voices of CYP to foreground their perspectives.

## METHODOLOGY

Rapid reviews accelerate and streamline the process of conducting a systematic review and are appropriate when evidence is needed quickly or time is limited (Garritty et al., 2021). This review was undertaken within a 2-month timeframe, so rapid review methodology was appropriate. The study team (EB, CE, MC) developed the review tools (inclusion/exclusion criteria, search parameters, abstract screening, data extraction forms), an academic librarian (SF) undertook the searches, then one researcher (EB) undertook inclusion screening, data extraction and data synthesis. The same researcher drafted an initial paper, which was commented on and agreed by the study team and then finalised.

## SEARCH STRATEGY

Search parameters were devised using the SPIDER search strategy tool, which is effective for use with qualitative and mixed methods studies (Cooke et al., 2012); parameters are set out in Table 1. The 'Phenomenon of Interest' was UC, but the first search run returned only three studies so this was widened to include welfare, family finances, low-income and poverty.

For rapid reviews, Garritty et al. (2021) recommend limiting 'database searching' to the main medical databases. As this was not a medical review the most relevant databases were identified as Academic Search Complete, CINAHL, Medline ProQuest Central PsycARTICLES and SocIndex. Database searching was undertaken 14–20 February 2022 and resulted in 459 hits; 400 remained following deletion of duplicated records. Reference lists of included studies were scanned for relevant articles, adding one study and searches for relevant publications by included authors added another three.

It was possible that studies on CYP's views of UC would be found within reports produced by the charity and voluntary sector, so internet searches were undertaken and websites of organisations familiar to the team (detailed in Table 2) were browsed (EB); 14 reports were identified.

**TABLE 1** SPIDER search terms.

Sample	'Young' OR 'teen*' OR 'children' OR 'young people' OR 'adolescen*'
Phenomenon of Interest	'Universal Credit' OR 'welfare benefits' OR 'welfare polic*' OR 'family finance*' OR 'family income' OR 'low income' OR 'poverty'
Design	'questionnaire*' OR 'survey*' OR 'interview*' OR 'focus group*' OR 'case stud*' OR 'observ*' OR 'creative method*'
Evaluation	'view*' OR 'experienc*' OR 'opinion*' OR 'attitude*' OR 'perce*' OR 'belie*' OR 'feel*' OR 'know*' OR 'understand*'
Research type	'qualitative' OR 'mixed method*'

**TABLE 2** Grey literature search.

<b>Organisation websites browsed</b>	
• Action for Children	• National Children's Bureau
• Barnardo's	• NSPCC
• Child Poverty Action Group	• Save the Children
• Children's Society	• Step Change
• Children's Commissioner for England	• Turn to us
• Joseph Rowntree Foundation	• Youth Futures Foundation

**TABLE 3** Eligibility criteria for literature.

<b>Inclusion criteria</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Qualitative or mixed method studies conducted with CYP aged up to 18 years</li> <li>• Studies published in English on peer-reviewed platforms since 2009</li> <li>• Studies conducted in the UK</li> <li>• Studies in academic articles, literature reviews and systematic reviews, so long as respecting the other inclusion criteria</li> <li>• Grey literature (mentioned above)</li> </ul>
<b>Exclusion criteria</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Studies not reporting CYP's views on UC, welfare benefits, family income or poverty</li> <li>• Studies where voice of CYP difficult to discern</li> <li>• Academic studies published without peer-review—excluding grey literature</li> <li>• Studies not published in English</li> <li>• Studies not conducted in the UK</li> <li>• Theoretical papers and thought pieces</li> </ul>

## INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Eligibility criteria are detailed in Table 3. Our focus on UC determined the 2009 start date because policy discussions about UC first surfaced then (Centre for Social Justice, 2009). We persisted with 2009 when expanding our search terms to ensure studies were concurrent with UC; this was justified when we found a similar review covering 1998–2008 (Ridge, 2011).

## ABSTRACT SCREENING

Following Garritty et al. (2021), a title and abstract screening form was devised, calibrated and tested by the research team on five abstracts. Final abstract screening questions were: is the

research review or report primary research undertaken in the UK; and are CYP's views on UC, welfare, family finances, low-income or poverty presented. Possible answers were 'yes', 'no' or 'unsure'. One researcher (EB) then screened the remaining abstracts; only records with 'yes' to all questions were included for review. The full text of records marked 'unsure' but not excluded by other questions, were scan read and included/excluded using the abstract screening questions. Following abstract screening, 30 sources remained.

## DATA EXTRACTION

A data extraction form was created, piloted with five studies and amended. As this was a rapid review, the quality of studies and risk of bias were not appraised. During data extraction 13 sources (eight articles and six reports) were omitted due to the voice of CYP being limited or difficult to discern; and one because the full text could not be accessed. 16 sources proceeded to review (8 reports; 8 academic papers). Selection of studies is summarised in the PRISMA flow diagram in Figure 1.

## ANALYSIS

Due to the predominance of qualitative data, narrative synthesis was used to explore themes and relationships identified within and between studies and bring the review together. Thematic synthesis is particularly useful when addressing studies focussing on people's views and experiences (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Analysis began during data extraction with inductive identification of 'themes' from each study, which were then organised into 'descriptive themes' and applied deductively to each study to identify how they coalesced. Narrative synthesis enabled presentation of these themes.

## FINDINGS

Overall, 16 papers were synthesised. Study characteristics and focus are outlined first, followed by synthesis of five descriptive themes: education, housing and neighbourhood, food insecurity and social exclusion. CYP's views on the impacts of poverty on health and well-being across studies are then brought together.

### Characteristics of included studies

Characteristics of included studies are summarised in Table 4. All studies were conducted in the UK with CYP aged between 5–21 years and published between January 2009 and March 2022. Three were UK wide (Children's Society and Step Change, 2014; Pople et al., 2013; Save the Children, 2011); eight were undertaken in England (Children's Society, 2017; Fairbrother et al., 2012; Fairbrother et al., 2022; Harvey, 2016; Knight et al., 2018; Martin & Hart, 2011; Ridge, 2009, 2017); one in Northern Ireland (Belfast City Council Youth Forum (BCCYF), 2017), one in Scotland (Elsley, 2014) and one in Wales (John et al., 2013). The studies by Knight et al. (2018) and Spyrou (2013) were cross-national but focused on UK findings.

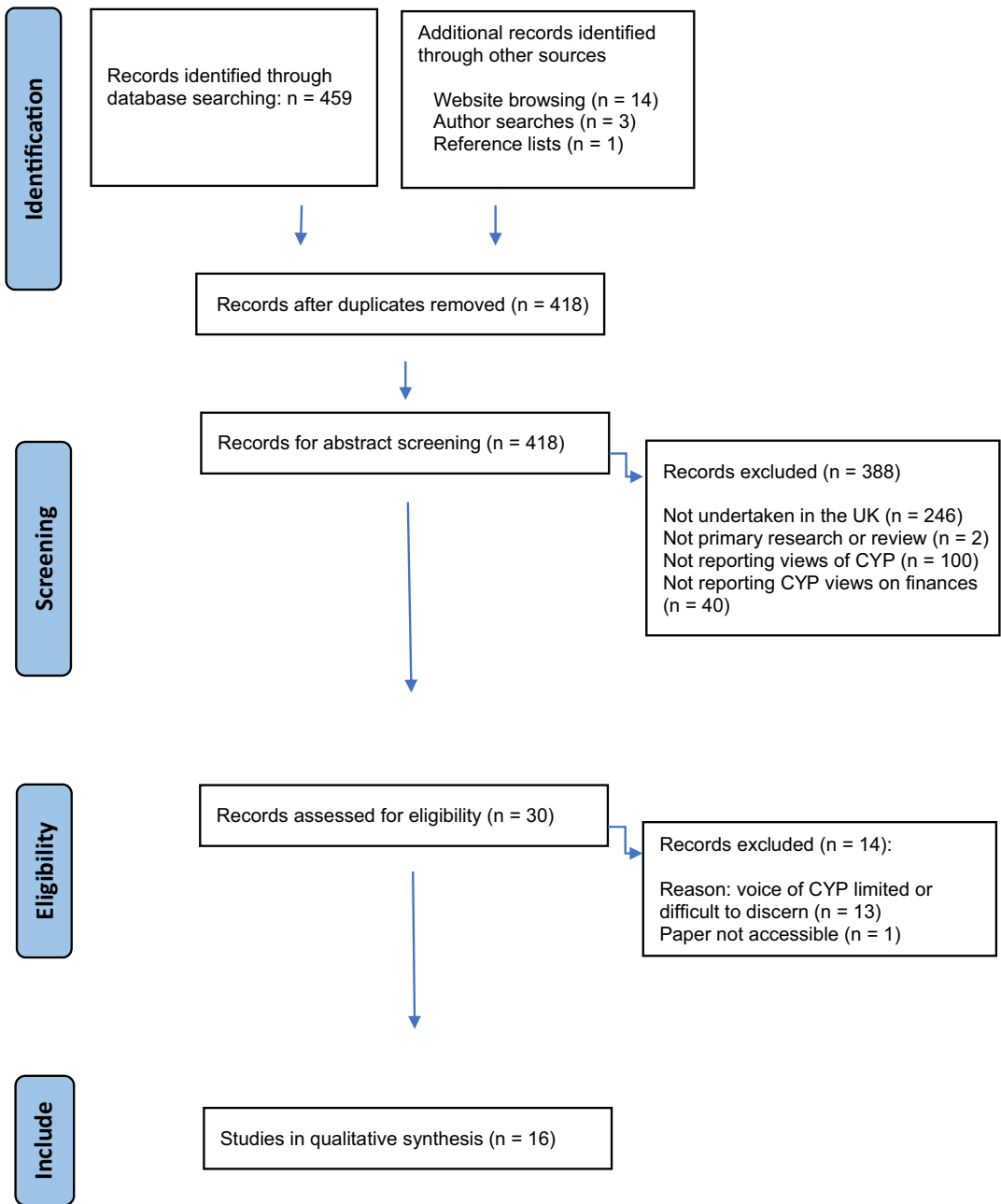


FIGURE 1 PRISMA flow diagram.

No studies on CYP's views of UC were identified; most focussed on poverty (BCCYF, 2017; Children's Society, 2017; Martin & Hart, 2011; Pople et al., 2013; Ridge, 2011; Save the Children, 2011) or the relationship between poverty and debt (Children's Society and Step Change, 2014), education (Elsley, 2014; John et al., 2013) or food insecurity (Knight et al., 2018). Others focussed on relationships between 'family finances' and healthy eating (Fairbrother et al., 2012), food insecurity (Harvey, 2016) or health inequality (Fairbrother et al., 2022). Ridge (2009, 2017) and Spyrou (2013) focussed on CYP in lone-parent families.

TABLE 4 Characteristics of included studies.

First author	Year	Location	Study design/methods	Participants	Duration of study	Focus
Belfast CCYF	2017	Belfast	Qualitative/Youth-led: focus groups	68 CYP aged 12–18, recruited from 7 youth groups; gender/ethnicity/socio-economic not specified (N/S)	3 months	Poverty
Children's Society	2017	3 locations in England (rural town, small city and large city, in southwest, southeast and middle of country)	Qualitative: longitudinal, semi-structured interviews	60 CYP aged 9–10 and 11–12, recruited from primary and secondary schools; mixed gender/ethnicity; all on FSMs	3 years (first wave)	Poverty
Children's Society	2014	UK wide survey; focus group in Manchester	Mixed: survey, in-depth interviews, 1 focus group	Survey: 2000 CYP aged 10–17; recruitment/gender/ethnicity/socio-economic N/S Interview: 6 CYP recruited via debt charity; age/gender/ethnicity N/S Focus group: number/recruitment/age/gender/ethnicity N/S	N/S	Poverty/debt
Elsley	2014	Scotland (Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Fife, Glasgow, North Ayrshire, West Dunbartonshire)	Mixed: survey and youth-led focus groups	Survey: 885 CYP aged 11–15 recruited from 12 secondary schools with high proportions of FSMs; gender/ethnicity N/S Focus group: 64 CYP aged 11–14 recruited as above; 36 girls, 28 boys, ethnicity N/S	3 months	Poverty/education
Fairbrother	2012	Northern England	Qualitative: 1. semi-structured interview using pictures and drawing 2. participation in a debate 3. follow-up interviews	Interviews: 53 CYP aged 9–10 recruited from 2 schools in socio-economically contrasting neighbourhoods (based on FSMs and local knowledge); participants in one school all on FSMs. Follow-up interviews: 8 CYP; gender/ethnicity N/S	9 months	Family finances/healthy eating

TABLE 4 (Continued)

First author	Year	Location	Study design/methods	Participants	Duration of study	Focus
Fairbrother	2022	England (South Yorkshire, North East, London)	Qualitative: focus groups	42 CYP aged 13–21 recruited from youth groups based in socio-economically deprived neighbourhoods (IOD most deprived quintile), mixed gender identity/ethnicity	N/S	Family finances/health inequality
Harvey	2016	Lambeth, South London	Mixed: survey of parents and semi-structured interviews with CYP talking about their drawings of meals	19 CYP aged 5–11 recruited from a charitable centre, mixed gender and identified as food insecure, ethnicity N/S	N/S	Family finances/food insecurity
John	2013	North and South Wales	Mixed/youth led: survey and focus groups	Survey: 183 CYP aged 11–14 recruited via schools in deprived areas (Welsh IOD) and high FSM; mixed gender, ethnicity N/S Focus groups: 22 CYP aged 11–14 recruited via survey; mixed gender, ethnicity N/S	2 months	Poverty/education
Knightliff <sup>a</sup>	2018	London borough and English coastal town (location N/S)	Qualitative: semi-structured interviews; follow-up interviews using visual methods	45 CYP in UK study recruited from schools and local charities; 3 case studies reported: one 15-year-old white British boy in London; one 13-year-old white British girl in coastal town; one 15-year-old West African migrant boy living in London	2 years	Poverty/food insecurity
Martin	2011	Birmingham, Islington, Liverpool, Newham and Selby	Qualitative: focus groups	73 CYP aged 10–20, recruitment from Local Authority youth groups in areas of high deprivation; Gender/ethnicity N/S	3 months	Poverty
Pople	2013	UK	Mixed: survey, interviews and group consultations	Survey: 2000 CYP, CYP 'not well-off at all' identified, recruitment/gender/ethnicity N/S Interviews and consultations: Recruitment/number/age/gender/ethnicity/socio-economic N/S	N/S	Poverty

(Continues)



TABLE 4 (Continued)

First author	Year	Location	Study design/methods	Participants	Duration of study	Focus
Ridge2F <sup>b</sup>	2009	England (various unnamed areas)	Qualitative: longitudinal in-depth interviews	16 CYP, initially aged 8–15, recruitment N/S but mothers had moved between social security and employment during preceding 12 months; gender/ethnicity N/S	4 years	Impact of lone mother un/employment on CYP
Ridge	2011	N/A	Review	'Pragmatic and iterative review' of qualitative research with low-income children and parents conducted in the UK 1998–2008	N/S	Poverty
Ridge3F <sup>c</sup>	2017	England (various unnamed areas)	Qualitative: longitudinal in-depth interviews	61 CYP initially aged 8–15 from 50 lone mother families, recruitment/gender/ethnicity N/S	5 years	Negotiating money and care with separated parents
Save the Children	2011	Economically disadvantaged communities across UK (Belfast, Bradford, Cardiff, Leicester, London, Oldham, Scotland)	N/S	CYP aged 8–17, recruitment via involvement with Save the Children services; number/gender/ethnicity N/S	N/S	Poverty
Spyrou4F <sup>d</sup>	2013	Cyprus, Greece and UK	Qualitative, cross-national: interviews and focus groups in each country	In each country Interviews: 40 CYP aged 6–16, recruitment N/S; gender/ethnicity/socio-economic N/S Focus groups $n = 8$ (4 single parent CYP and 4 two-parent CYP), number of participants N/S Demographics balanced in age, sex, class, ethnicity	N/S	Poverty in single parent families

<sup>a</sup>UK data is reported from a larger, mixed method European study (UK, Portugal and Norway).

<sup>b</sup>Data reported is from a larger study ('The family work project: earning and caring in low-income households') of 61 CYP (from 50 lone mother families) initially aged 8–15.

<sup>c</sup>As above.

<sup>d</sup>Data reviewed here are from the UK study. Interviews and focus groups were also undertaken with single and two-parent families and professionals working with families.

Six studies employed mixed methods. Most involved a survey complemented by semi-structured interviews or focus groups (Elsley, 2014; Harvey, 2016; Pople et al., 2013). The study by Knight et al. (2018) involved secondary analysis of large data sets and interviews.

Qualitative approaches were used in six studies. Fairbrother et al. (2022) and Martin and Hart (2011) used focus groups; Spyrou (2013) employed both interviews and focus groups. Fairbrother et al. (2012) used interviews and involved CYP in a debate. The Children's Society (2017) and Ridge (2009, 2017) undertook interviews longitudinally. Three studies also employed creative methods such as drawing pictures and photography (Fairbrother et al., 2012; Harvey, 2016; Knight et al., 2018). Such methods were particularly useful in engaging younger children (Harvey, 2016).

Two studies involved participatory youth research undertaken with training and support from other agencies. The National Children's Bureau supported BCCYF (2017) to undertake focus groups to make CYP's views on poverty known to decision makers. Save the Children Wales and 'The Big Learning Company' supported young Welsh researchers (John et al., 2013) to undertake a survey and focus groups investigating poverty and its effects on education. Additionally, six CYP received training to assist in the focus groups undertaken by Elsley (2014).

One report (Save the Children, 2011) was unclear on methods but was included due to its focus on the voices of CYP. One paper (Ridge, 2011:74) reported a 'pragmatic and iterative' literature review of qualitative research with CYP living in low-income households published in academic and non-academic sources 1998–2008.

All studies reported the age range of participants. The youngest sample was aged 5–11 years (Harvey, 2016) and the oldest aged 13–21 years (Fairbrother et al., 2022), this sample included several over 18s who were members of established groups (Fairbrother et al., 2022) as did Martin and Hart's study (2011); however, it was not possible to exclude their input in either study due to reporting styles. Regarding other characteristics, only Fairbrother et al. (2022) gave detailed description of gender/gender identity, ethnicity and deprivation; others were less precise about demographics.

Most studies recruited participants through schools (BCCYF, 2017; Children's Society, 2017; Elsley, 2014; Fairbrother et al., 2012; John et al., 2013; Knight et al., 2018) and/or youth groups (BCCYF, 2017; Fairbrother et al., 2022; Knight et al., 2018; Martin & Hart, 2011). Harvey (2016) accessed participants identified as food insecure via a charity and Save the Children (2011) involved CYP service users. The remaining studies did not detail recruitment methods. Most attempted to recruit CYP with experience of economic disadvantage. The Children's Society (2017) and Fairbrother et al. (2012) targeted children in receipt of free school meals (FSMs), whilst Elsley (2014) and John et al. (2013) targeted schools with high proportions of FSMs. Ridge (2009, 2017) and Spyrou (2013) focussed on CYP in lone-parent families. Two studies targeted areas of high deprivation determined using Indices of Deprivation, which appears to have been less effective. For example, Martin and Hart (2011:16) undertook focus groups in five areas of high deprivation across England; irrespective there was 'some variation in young people's personal circumstances.' Similarly, Fairbrother et al. (2022) recruited from six youth groups located in the most deprived quintile on the Indices of Deprivation; however, participant postcodes placed them in deciles one to three. Finally, two studies sampled more generally but findings focussed on CYP experiencing poverty (Knight et al., 2018; Pople et al., 2013). The remaining studies did not report purposive sampling.

## Focus of the studies

Whilst no studies reported CYP's views on UC, welfare benefits were considered in some; these revealed contrasting views amongst CYP. For example, in research by BCCYF (2017:6) with CYP

aged 12–18 years from varied backgrounds, some participants pointed to inadequate welfare rates, especially for larger families, whereas others felt the ‘system was abused’ by people not in need and created a ‘benefit culture’. Similarly, in focus group research by Martin and Hart (2011), where participants were aged 10–20 years from areas of high deprivation, some considered benefits to disadvantage larger families and single parent families, whilst others linked a reliance on benefits to low motivation for education and employment.

Most studies focussed on poverty and showed CYP were able to distinguish between absolute poverty (understood as being unable to meet basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter) and relative poverty (where some people cannot enjoy the standard of living customary to the rest of their society); to understand poverty as a complex phenomenon (Martin & Hart, 2011); and to perceive it as multifaceted and interrelated (BCCYF, 2017; Fairbrother et al., 2022). Some CYP in the Belfast study (BCCYF, 2017) perceived poverty as a trap caused by unemployment, low pay, lack of jobs and inadequate resources. They also described symptoms of poverty, (including poor housing/homelessness; physical and mental ill health; low educational achievement; lacking necessities and choice) (BCCYF, 2017). People living in poverty were said to experience financial hardship (struggling with bills, no holidays); restricted access to food (needing FSMs and foodbanks); insecure housing (living on the street, in hostels or poor neighbourhoods); they were also seen as vulnerable to debt and loan sharks when unforeseen circumstances occur (e.g. unexpected bills and white goods breaking down) (BCCYF, 2017). Simultaneously, stereotypical images emerged wherein poor people could be identified by their behaviours (begging, truancy, making excuses not to meet friends socially) and their appearance (wearing second-hand/cheap clothing, poor hygiene, unkempt, looking tired, sick, sad—which may also be signifiers of poor mental/physical health) (BCCYF, 2017).

Evidence from studies with CYP experiencing economic disadvantage showed them to be aware of their parents’ financial situation (Children’s Society, 2017; Fairbrother et al., 2012; Pople et al., 2013; Ridge, 2017; Save the Children, 2011), although they tried to hide the emotional costs to themselves from parents (Children’s Society, 2017; Pople et al., 2013; Save the Children, 2011). Moreover, CYP were empathetic to the pressures parents faced, aware of their shame and loneliness because of financial hardship and shared their stress (Save the Children, 2011). For example, in Pople et al.’s study (2013) 78% of the CYP considering themselves ‘not well-off at all’ worried about money and were ‘extremely anxious’ about their family’s finances; they displayed awareness of issues of debt, food prices and the value of money and saving.

Several studies evidenced strategies CYP employed to protect family finances, from spending their own money on household items (Children’s Society, 2017), to not asking for things they wanted but knew parents could not afford (Children’s Society, 2017; Ridge, 2017; Spyrou, 2013), and suppressing their needs for clothing and activities (Ridge, 2011). Ridge (2011:76) argued that children were ‘torn between the social and personal imperatives of needing and wanting more and collective familial needs to moderate and constrain their demands’.

Such stresses were evidenced in studies undertaken with CYP from single parent families, usually mothers (Ridge, 2009; Spyrou, 2013). These authors, together with Martin and Hart (2011) and Fairbrother et al. (2022), highlighted ‘time poverty’ amongst lone parents from taking on too much work (Martin & Hart, 2011; Ridge, 2009; Spyrou, 2013). CYP in Fairbrother et al.’s study (2022) were cognisant of the long and unsociable hours worked by many on low incomes; they foregrounded time as a social determinant of health. Moreover, time poverty caused distress to CYP who desired greater emotional closeness and interaction time with their mothers (Spyrou, 2013). Ridge (2009) undertook longitudinal research with CYP initially aged 8–15 years living in lone mother households whose mothers had moved off benefits into

employment. Whilst CYP noted material gains from employment, including increased participation in school and social activities, for those whose mothers later lost that employment and returned to benefits, the loss of her employment was felt intensely and meant a loss of status which CYP found embarrassing. Further, 'children reported doing less, having less and cutting down on social activities, events and clubs' (Ridge, 2009:507). Nevertheless, like CYP in Spyrou's study (2013), some did not want their mother to regain employment, primarily because they enjoyed spending time with her, did not like childcare arrangements and were concerned about their mother's tiredness and stress. Ideally, children wanted mothers to work part-time for higher wages (Ridge, 2009).

In some studies, CYP revealed networks of family and friends as important sources of financial support, especially grandparents (Ridge, 2011). Such support networks made a massive difference to possessions, pocket money (Children's Society, 2017; Ridge, 2011) and food (Knight et al., 2018). Those without such networks had to do without (Children's Society, 2017).

## Descriptive themes

### Education

Poverty impacted greatly on CYP's experiences of education; studies made clear the financial costs connected to attending school. CYP highlighted the high costs of uniforms, learning resources and materials (books; pens; sports gear; materials for technology, home economics and art), extra-curricular activities (after school activities, clubs and school trips), and the difficulties these costs created for low-income families, which were multiplied for larger families (BCCYF, 2017; Children's Society, 2017; Children's Society and Step Change, 2014; Elsley, 2014; Martin & Hart, 2011; Pople et al., 2013).

Further, many low-income CYP reported being bullied and excluded from school activities due to their poverty (Children's Society and Step Change, 2014; Elsley, 2014; Martin & Hart, 2011; Pople et al., 2013). CYP in Martin and Hart's research (2011) pointed to unhelpful attitudes from teachers and peers, they highlighted not fitting in due to their appearance, which also caused bullying. The Children's Society and Step Change (2014) highlighted CYP's embarrassment at their difference from peers, from not having the right school uniform and being unable to pay for extras at school, to the extent that many reported how they wished they had a different life.

Evidence suggested that some schools treated poverty as a behavioural issue. CYP reported being given detentions for small infringements of rules, such as not having the correct uniform or sports equipment, or for being late (a particular issue for those with long, complex journeys) (Children's Society, 2017). Others mentioned being sanctioned or penalised (receiving de-merits) for not having equipment and/or uniform; losing a certain number of merits resulted in being excluded from school trips (Elsley, 2014).

Whilst ways exist to assist pupils in financial hardship, such interventions can prompt further causes of exclusion. For example, money is often available from schools to buy uniforms and resources, but is not available for replacements (Children's Society, 2017; Elsley, 2014); one young person commented that 'you buy them huge' so uniforms would last (Elsley, 2014:15). The ways in which FSMs were managed was particularly important to the CYP receiving them. Primary schools were reported to manage better than secondaries, where who received FSMs was obvious, which could be stigmatising and embarrassing, plus the amount available was said to be insufficient and restricted dietary choices (Children's Society, 2017; Martin & Hart, 2011).

Notwithstanding, for CYP in food insecure households their FSM was often their only meal of the day (Harvey, 2016).

Some studies showed CYP to hold oppositional views on the effects of poverty on education. For example, whilst three-quarters of CYP (aged 11–18 years) in Elsley's survey (2014) believed education was a route out of poverty, almost two-thirds (63%) did not believe poverty to affect educational achievement; more important was having a home (91%), having one's needs met (86%) and having a supportive family (81%)—at least two of which could be considered income dependant. CYP instead stressed the importance of personal qualities and attitudes (Elsley, 2014). Similarly, 58.5% of the CYP in the Welsh study (John et al., 2013) believed educational achievement was unaffected by income. Alternatively, CYP in Martin and Hart's research (2011) reported that poverty limited one's choice of school; they felt priced out of catchment areas for 'better' schools and constrained by transport costs. Likewise, CYP from Belfast believed that children from wealthier families benefited from better schools and, consequently, better life chances (BCCYF, 2017).

## Housing and neighbourhood

CYP reported poor housing conditions across studies (Fairbrother et al., 2022; Pople et al., 2013; Save the Children, 2011; Spyrou, 2013). In Pople et al.'s study (2013), 53% of those 'not well-off at all' reported insufficient space at home, 54% said homes were cold, and 26% reported damp and mould. Having friends for 'sleepovers' was not desired because CYP were embarrassed by their poor living conditions (Fairbrother et al., 2022; Save the Children, 2011; Spyrou, 2013). Of greatest importance to CYP in Spyrou's study (2013) was having adequate space, space for a table and one's own bedroom (Spyrou, 2013). Participants in the study by Fairbrother et al. (2022) made a direct connection between cramped living conditions and poor mental health. Martin and Hart (2011:30) reported 'older young people' felt trapped at home due to lack of space and that the need to escape could lead to negative influences and risky behaviours such as alcohol and drug misuse, and anti-social behaviour, resulting in negative impacts at neighbourhood level. Nonetheless, whilst some CYP reported insufficient bedrooms, others reported insufficient beds (Save the Children, 2011).

The Children's Society (2017) found high levels of residential transience amongst CYP (from diverse backgrounds, all in receipt of FSMs), with some experiencing several moves to the extent that it had become their norm. A host of reasons were given, including escaping domestic or neighbourhood violence, bullying and crime; family units breaking up; and eviction (Children's Society, 2017:14). Losing a home was reported to be particularly stressful, resulting in lost friendships and having to move schools; trying to stay in the same school was expensive and tiring due to distance by public transport (Children's Society, 2017).

Furthermore, low-income CYP reported living in degraded neighbourhoods/local environments (Children's Society, 2017; Fairbrother et al., 2022; Pople et al., 2013; Save the Children, 2011). CYP felt unsafe in their local streets and parks due to traffic, troublesome adults and neighbours, the perceived danger of large groups of teenagers and gangs, animals, rubbish and mess (Children's Society, 2017; Fairbrother et al., 2022; Save the Children, 2011). Fairbrother et al. (2022) noted that narratives around crime and safety were prevalent amongst female and LGBTQ participants. Also, CYP observed that much anti-social behaviour was due to a lack of other things to do (Fairbrother et al., 2022). In Ridge's review (2011:79) safe public space was perceived essential to urban, low-income CYP, but younger children reported lacking decent



quality, safe spaces to play, and older young people reported lacking places to meet and socialise. CYP in Belfast believed that investment was being targeted in the wrong places and that some communities were being 'left behind' as a result (BCCYF, 2017:7).

We identified no studies focussing on CYP's experiences of rural poverty. However, Ridge (2011:79) reported rurally located CYP to experience poverty as highly stigmatising; the lack of leisure opportunities and dependence on 'expensive, inflexible and inadequate' public transport resulted in CYP being highly visible in public spaces and subject to adult surveillance and censure.

## Food insecurity

Three studies examined CYP's views on food insecurity. Harvey (2016) obtained the narratives of children aged 5–11; several reported missing meals (especially at weekends), feeling problematic hunger (due to unavailability of food) and going to bed hungry. Whilst children reported less availability of unhealthy snacks and treats, they also suggested their parents could not afford nutritionally balanced diets, with many eating ready meals from shops (Harvey, 2016). CYP in Knight et al.'s case studies (2018), who lived only with their mothers, highlighted that the quality and quantity of their food was compromised by poverty; they reported often having no food at home, filling up on breakfast cereals, bread and pizza and that mothers went without so that they and siblings could eat.

In Fairbrother et al.'s research (2012) with 9–10-year-olds attending two schools in contrasting socio-economic areas, all showed awareness of family finances and how these influenced food purchases, but children in the disadvantaged area (school1) spontaneously referred to financial constraints and cost, whilst those in the advantaged area (school2) did so only when prompted. Further, only children in school1 mentioned the cost of school meals, which was a big issue for low-income children not entitled to FSMs (Fairbrother et al., 2012). Many children in school1 talked about parents struggling to make ends meet, having to prioritise and shop around; restricted finances were 'a recurrent theme', which was matched for some with feelings of unfairness (Fairbrother et al., 2012:531). Alternatively, children in school2 did not believe food costs to be constraining; they were aware their socio-economic position enabled them to eat healthily (Fairbrother et al., 2012). Both groups believed healthy foods should cost less and that government could facilitate this; consequently, they insisted on 'corporate and state responsibility for ensuring that eating healthily is affordable for everyone' (Fairbrother et al., 2012:535).

CYP in other studies also referenced food, mostly in relation to families optimising their money by shopping around, using cheaper supermarkets, buying food on offer or reduced; they noted this impacted their ability to eat healthily (Children's Society, 2017; Fairbrother et al., 2022; Martin & Hart, 2011; Pople et al., 2013). In addition, studies referred to CYP opting not to participate in social activities with food involved, such as going for a snack with friends, which then contributed to their social exclusion (Children's society and Step Change, 2014; Elsley, 2014; Spyrou, 2013).

## Social exclusion—Joining in and fitting in

CYP reported experiencing social exclusion in friendships due to being unable to afford to join in activities and/or purchase items or clothing perceived as normal, which enabled them to 'fit in' (Children's Society and Step Change, 2014; Elsley, 2014; Fairbrother et al., 2022; Knight et al., 2018; Martin & Hart, 2011; Pople et al., 2013; Spyrou, 2013). CYP in Pople et al.'s research (2013) reported lacking many basics like food, bedding, towels, clothing, as well as toys, bicycles and games; few had holidays or participated in day trips or other activities with family

and friends, which they desired. CYP reported feeling jealous and embarrassed at not having the same opportunities as peers (Children's Society and Step Change, 2014). The CYP in Elsley's study (2014) believed that activities outside of school contributed to happiness, well-being, health and fitness, but CYP with little money were said to feel left out of activities in which their friends participated. According to Pople et al., (2013:14) 'Transport and participation costs often conspire to leave children feeling excluded from many of the social and leisure experiences that their more affluent peers take for granted'.

Moreover, lacking certain items signified to CYP their poverty and their difference (Martin & Hart, 2011; Spyrou, 2013). According to the Children's Society (2017), fitting in and having the same possessions was more important than more possessions; brand name trainers were desired as was clothing in line with that of peers. The CYP in Martin and Hart's research (2011) highlighted peer and societal pressure to own certain items—including from teachers with expectations of computer ownership and internet access for homework. Their lack of technology (mobile phones and internet) was reported to contribute to isolation as they could not communicate outside of school (Martin & Hart, 2011). As Ridge (2017:91) argues, 'childhood is an increasingly commodified space and childhood consumption is rising, the low-income child can find themselves on the outside of childhood cultural norms and expectations, looking in'.

## Impact of poverty on health and well-being

Many CYP believed poverty to impact physical health by limiting people's ability to eat healthily (BCCYF, 2017; Children's Society, 2017; Fairbrother et al., 2012; Fairbrother et al., 2022; Harvey, 2016; Knight et al., 2018; Martin & Hart, 2011; Pople et al., 2013). Participants in Fairbrother et al.'s study (2022) highlighted several barriers to healthy eating including cost (limited finances/competing priorities), access (lack of shops locally, unhealthy food being cheaper), ubiquity of unhealthy food (lots of take-aways) and lack of time. The CYP in Harvey's study (2016) reported often going hungry and parents being unable to provide nutritionally balanced diets due to costs. Going without food when bodies are growing, and high calorie intake is necessary, is bound to impact the educational achievement and physical health of CYP; impacting into adulthood (Knight et al., 2018). However, several participants in Fairbrother et al.'s study (2022) moved between social and individualised explanations for poor health, with some disagreeing that healthy diets cost more and highlighting that outdoor space was free to everyone to exercise. Some also pointed to 'the presence and transfer of health-damaging practices through families and within communities', which normalise unhealthy dietary choices (Fairbrother et al., 2022:10).

Housing and neighbourhood were also identified as impacting on CYP's health with CYP reporting poor housing conditions in several studies. Living in damp and decaying housing inevitably leads to respiratory problems (Pople et al., 2013) and lack of warmth causes frequent colds and poor health (Ridge, 2011). CYP in Fairbrother et al.'s study (2022) connected poor housing to poor health, particularly mental health, as overcrowded, cramped homes compromised CYP's privacy.

Living in 'run down' neighbourhoods was also perceived to impact health and cause significant anxiety in CYP (BCCYF, 2017; Children's Society, 2017; Fairbrother et al., 2022). CYP were reported to be particularly vulnerable to risks from road traffic and environmental pollution, and many lacked decent, safe places to play (Children's Society, 2017). Access to healthy spaces and activities further afield was prohibited by transport, which CYP found too expensive (Fairbrother et al., 2022).

Notwithstanding, poverty was seen to impact most on CYP's mental health and subjective well-being. As noted previously, families' financial situations were a source of anxiety and worry for CYP (Children's Society, 2017; Fairbrother et al., 2012; Pople et al., 2013; Save the Children, 2011; Spyrou, 2013). Participants in Fairbrother et al.'s study (2022) implicitly pointed to a link between the everyday stress and strain of poverty with poor mental health.

## DISCUSSION

This rapid review sought studies reporting CYP's views on UC; however, none were found. Included studies mostly focussed on CYP's perspectives on poverty, with remarkable consensus across findings. These indicated that growing up in poverty can have significant, negative impacts on CYP's physical health, mental health and well-being, causing feelings of exclusion, shame and a sense of unfairness. Low-income CYP's experience of school was often an unhappy one in which they struggled to fit in and join in on equal terms due to lacking many items and resources they were expected to possess. Outside of school, they were excluded from social activities more affluent peers took for granted. They also experienced degraded housing and neighbourhood conditions, often feeling trapped at home but afraid to go outside. Food insecurity and doing without was normalised for many. CYP adapted their preferences for possessions and recreational activities by not asking for the things they wanted because they knew some were unaffordable, challenging assumptions that parents protect their children from the effects of poverty. These themes are known social determinants of health relating to the 'conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life' (WHO, 2022). Notwithstanding, only one study (Fairbrother et al., 2022) focussed exclusively on relationships between socio-economic circumstances and health; more research is needed in this area.

Other absences were apparent too. Participant demographics, sampling and recruitment strategies, and methods were underreported. Few studies appraised their recruitment strategies, although most attempted to purposively recruit CYP with experience of disadvantage. Some recruited from schools and/or youth groups in areas of deprivation identified using Indices of Deprivation or eligibility for FSM; this appeared effective, but authors noted the presence of less disadvantaged CYP in their samples. Recruiting CYP in receipt of FSMs (Children's Society, 2017; Fairbrother et al., 2012) or by collaborating with charities supporting disadvantaged CYP (Harvey, 2016; Save the Children, 2011) appeared most effective. There is debate over whether eligibility for FSMs is an effective proxy for socio-economic disadvantage; critiques highlight FSMs are an indicator of income rather than social disadvantage, that not all CYP in poverty are eligible to apply, and not all eligible families do apply (Taylor, 2018). These are important insights for quantitative studies examining the relationships between socio-economic status and outcomes. Notwithstanding, Taylor (2018:46) found eligibility for FSM to be a 'very good indicator' of socio-economic disadvantage.

Sociodemographic characteristics were underreported in some studies and rarely reported alongside findings/quotes. Consequently, it was difficult to assess whether CYP with different characteristics (age, disability, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, migrant status) perceived poverty differently, although this does not mean diverse voices were not present. Fairbrother et al. (2022) described the sociodemographic makeup of their sample in detail but chose to prioritise participant confidentiality over reporting of characteristics alongside findings. They noted, however, that individual perspectives were often nuanced, moving between individualised and



structural explanations in ‘malleable and dynamic ways’ (Fairbrother et al., 2022:12). Nonetheless, the body of work reviewed here generally reported the views of CYP as though they were a homogenous group and whilst there may be shared experiences, more research is needed to understand the experiences and views of different groups of CYP. For example, no studies focusing exclusively or explicitly on the perspectives of disabled or rural CYP were found, which is a significant absence. Notwithstanding, the essence of findings from studies involving older or younger CYP were consistent across studies.

Author reflections on methods were rare and no studies reported CYP’s opinions on them, although these may appear in separate methodology papers. Fairbrother et al. (2022) discussed the challenges of safely discussing sensitive issues with those impacted by them; they highlighted that stigma associated with disadvantage can make talking about it challenging and so framed their questions so that CYP could talk more generally and did not feel pressured into talking about themselves. Fairbrother et al. (2012) reported that interviewing CYP in small friendship groups offered a level of comfort and security when talking about sensitive issues. Harvey (2016) found creative research methods were successful with younger children, noting they may be reticent or shy in one-on-one settings but will talk during an activity. Notwithstanding, more details from researchers on how to talk safely about financial hardship is desirable.

Overall, findings demonstrate consistent patterns across CYP’s views and experiences of poverty; these align with existing evidence, which persistently indicates that growing up in poverty can have significant, negative impacts on health, educational, social and well-being outcomes (Pickett et al., 2021). They reiterate Ridge’s (, 2011:82) review of evidence between 1998 to 2008, which provided ‘clear, consistent and largely unequivocal evidence about the pervasive and damaging effects of childhood poverty’. Notwithstanding, research studies designed to both prioritise and protect the voices of CYP are needed to help policymakers understand the impacts of welfare benefits on CYP’s health, education and future life opportunities.

## STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

This rapid review is limited due to the restricted timeframe and resources. It is also limited due to its reliance on one researcher to undertake all inclusion screening, data extraction and data synthesis, which can result in some bias, and the quality of included studies was not assessed. These limitations were unavoidable given available funding. Notwithstanding, whilst no studies on UC were identified, the review included research that addressed CYP’s views on poverty/family hardship and impacts on health and well-being; with significant consensus between studies.

## CONCLUSION

Whilst no studies reporting the views of CYP on UC were identified, the evidence presented raises important questions about the adequacy of welfare support in the UK and the impacts for CYP. Findings enable insights into some of the design features of UC, such as the impacts for larger families of the two-child limit and benefits cap; the privacy impacts for CYP due to house size and rent restrictions within the housing element, as well as the time poverty caused by the claimant commitment for mothers/responsible carers. Findings also challenge the notion that parents can protect their children from the effects of poverty thus demonstrating the importance

of engaging CYP in discussions on social policy design and in understanding the wider effects of policies such as UC on their lives.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

### ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethics approval and participant consent were not required as no human participants were involved. No material from other sources has been reproduced.

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