

Child Wellbeing and Play: The role of income, love and environment



What makes life better for children in our cities?

Children's wellbeing and play in early years shapes future life chances

- Poverty affects birthweight, physical and mental health, learning and social development
- Space to play and play outside supports physical and cognitive development and helps avoid health problems such as obesity from being inactive too long, and children say they feel happier outside
- Learning and socialising with others, especially from age 2, helps children be school ready
- During the Covid-19 pandemic the Universal Credit uplift decreased child poverty rates, showing that **policy change is an important lever in reducing inequality**

Key findings from our research in Bradford and Tower Hamlets



Nearly half of families with young children are **financially insecure** and worry about **job security**

"We are surviving only on child credit tax and unable to pay rent, insurance even council tax all accounts are on overdraft limit"
Bradford Parent



Most parents have good **relationships** with each other and their children but many have poor mental health

"the four of us have got now a really close nice bond that I don't know if we would have had otherwise"
Tower Hamlets Parent



Nearly 1/3 of households do not have private **outdoor space** for children to play; this is higher in Tower Hamlets than Bradford

"we sleep all three in one bed....during the day we have just this 6 metres that [my 18 month old is] going between that and our bed, that's the place that he has to play"
Tower Hamlets Parent

Recommendations to improve children's wellbeing and play

1

Accessible and culturally relevant **advisory services** to maximise family income and reduce stress

2

Housing that is spacious, offers outdoor space and of quality to avoid damp and mould

3

Neighbourhoods and **parks** that are safe with play equipment

4

Ensure play provision is prioritised in all **policies**

Three key factors affect children's wellbeing and play: The situation in Bradford and Tower Hamlets

Results from surveys completed by mothers of under 13s in Bradford and parents of under 5s in Tower Hamlets in 2020/21



Poverty and Insecurity

- **Financial insecurity** was common in both locations (Fig. 1)
- Half of parents were **food insecure** often going without meals (Fig. 2)
- **Job insecurity** was common in low and middle income earners

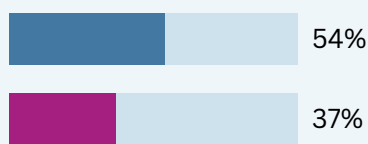


Figure 1: Parents reporting financial insecurity in **Tower Hamlets** and **Bradford**



Figure 2: **Half** of parents go without meals

"I took money out of the credit card, I had no choice, I needed to get food, I've got bills to pay. I've got to feed me, I've got to feed my son" *Tower Hamlets Parent*



Family Relationships



Figure 3: Parents reporting **loneliness**



Figure 4: Parents reporting clinically significant symptoms of **depression and anxiety**

- Parents' relationships with each other and their children are one of the main protective factors for children's wellbeing
- Parents had good relationships with each other; however, a significant proportion reported that their **parental mental health** was affected (Fig. 3 & 4). In 2021, 42% of fathers and 26% of mothers in Tower Hamlets described depressive symptoms
- 4 in 5 Tower Hamlets parents **supported children with learning** and 1 in 4 Bradford parents lacked confidence with home learning



Spaces to Play

- Half of **Tower Hamlets** and 13% of **Bradford** households did not have private outdoor **space for children to play** (Fig. 5)
- **Play** was similar in both sites (Fig. 6). In 2021 in Tower Hamlets, 71% of under 5s played outside daily. In 2019 in Bradford, 69% of children were considered sufficiently active using activity questionnaires

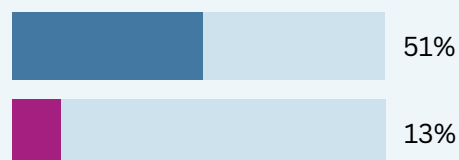
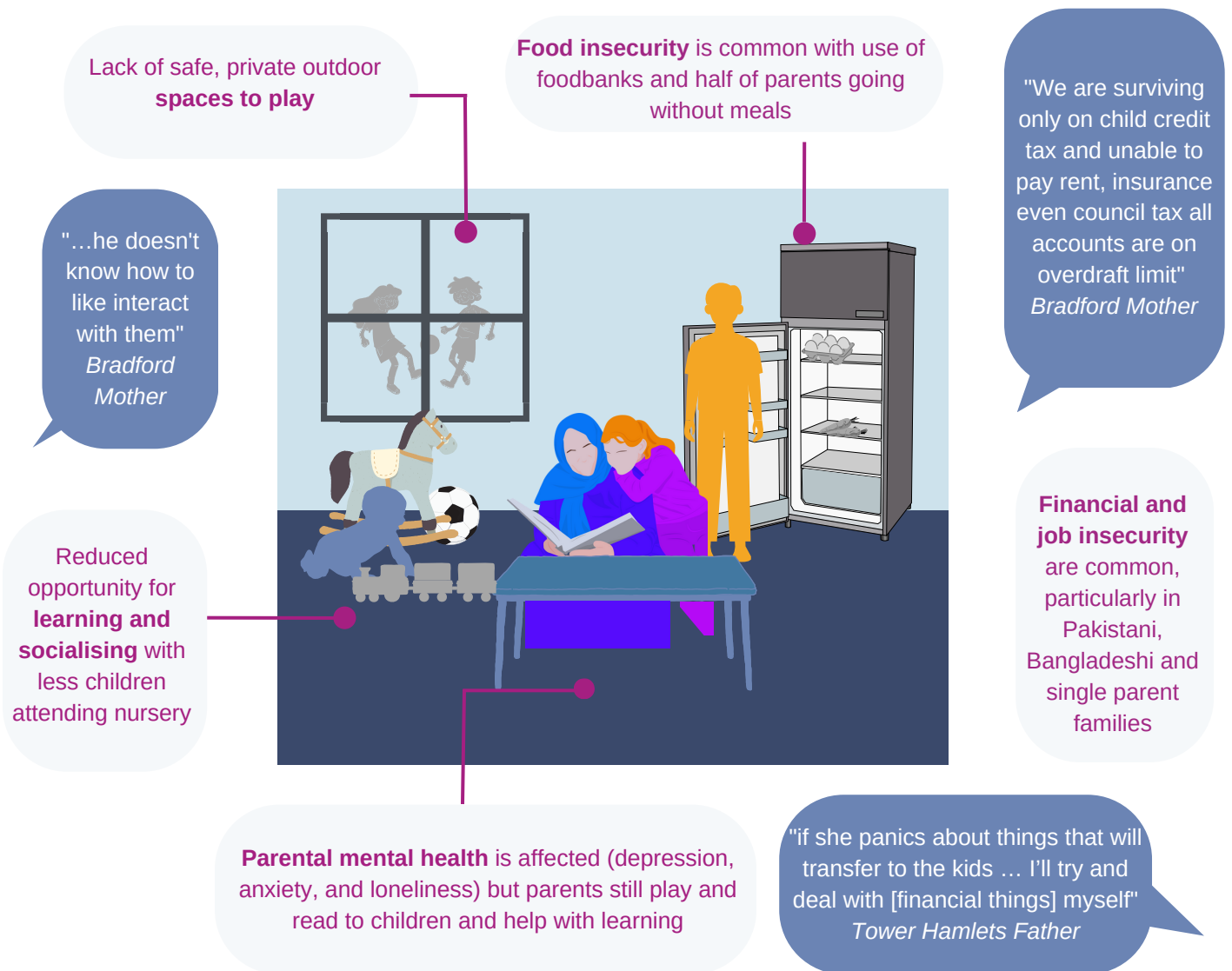


Figure 5: Families without outdoor space in **Tower Hamlets** and **Bradford**



Figure 6:
Tower Hamlets: Number of under 5s playing outside daily
Bradford: Number of sufficiently active under 13s

Children's wellbeing and ability to play is affected by many factors in Bradford and Tower Hamlets



Underlying research - Tower Hamlets



Policy briefings from the ESRC funded 'Families in Tower Hamlets' study (ES/V004891/1)

- Housing and environment for young children during the pandemic: Families in Tower Hamlets community survey and panel findings
- Pandemic impacts on Family Lives and Parental Wellbeing: Families in Tower Hamlets survey and panel findings
- Work, income and food insecurity: Families in Tower Hamlets community survey and panel findings
- Young children's lives during the pandemic: Families in Tower Hamlets survey and panel findings

Underlying research - Bradford



Bingham et al., 2021. "[Covid-19 lockdown: Ethnic differences in children's self-reported physical activity and the importance of leaving the home environment; a longitudinal and cross-sectional study from the Born in Bradford birth cohort study](#)". *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*; 18 (2021): 1-19

About the study: Part of the Born in Bradford COVID-19 Study. Self-reported, validated questionnaires measured physical activity, sleep, and sedentary behaviour in 949 children (9–13 years). A sub-sample (n = 634) also self-reported physical activity levels pre-pandemic (2017-February 2020).

Dickerson et al., 2020. "[Experiences of lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic: descriptive findings from a survey of families in the Born in Bradford study](#)". Wellcome Open Research, 5:228.

About the study: Bradford survey completed during the first Covid-19 UK lockdown (10th April to 30th June 2020) with parents participating in two longitudinal studies. Of 7,652 families invited, 2,144 (28%) participated.

This research was carried out in partnership with Tower Hamlets and Bradford Councils. Further Briefings and Reports Relating to Family and Community Impacts of Covid-19 are available at: www.bradfordresearch.nhs.uk/family-and-community-impacts-of-covid-19/

This work was undertaken as part of ActEarly: A City Collaboratory approach to early life changes to improve the health and opportunities for children living in areas with high levels of child poverty; Bradford, West Yorkshire and Tower Hamlets, London. ActEarly is supported by the UK Prevention Research Partnership, an initiative funded by UK Research and Innovation Councils, the Department of Health and Social Care (England) and the UK devolved administrations, and leading health research charities.

Partners

