

CHiLD POVERTY ACTION GROUP

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Experts warn on children's health

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) is urging the government to heed the findings of health researchers who have highlighted the dangers of worsening children's health in the recession. The Children's Social Health Monitor, compiled by children's health professionals, warns that children who suffer low incomes in their first 5 years face a greatly increased risk of a range of serious disease many of which can have lifelong effects.

CPAG says this includes the estimated 240,000 children living in families reliant on benefit income. According to spokesperson Donna Wynd: "The government's own figures show thousands of families on benefits were living in very stringent circumstances even before the recession. Now, with housing and energy prices starting to rise again, and ever more families on benefits or reduced incomes, it is important to ensure that all children, particularly our youngest and most vulnerable have access to good food and adequate medical care."

Preliminary indicators from the Children's Social Health Monitor show a small increase in children's hospital admissions in 2008. CPAG says this is consistent with the recent increase in child poverty rates. "This also follows the historical pattern of child poverty and children's hospital admissions moving together. All the data points to miserably low incomes being the key factor in children's health. Poor children's health is not inevitable, and we should be acting now to prevent it," said Ms Wynd.

Most families who lose jobs or have their hours cut back also lose part of their Working for Families tax credits.

Social assistance spokesperson Professor Mike O'Brien said the group remains concerned about the effects of falling family incomes.

"The Government's ReStart package, which was designed to lessen the worst effects of the recession, is woefully inadequate. Too few families have benefitted from this package to arrest any income-related decline in children's health. The In-Work Tax Credit should be available to all low-income families even if they lose their jobs, or are on a benefit. This would be the most effective and immediate way to help parents meet the cost of caring for their children."

The Children's Social Health Monitor is being released on the 25th November at the Paediatric Society's Conference. It has been developed to monitor the impact of the current economic downturn on child wellbeing. CPAG is hopeful it will encourage policymakers to respond quickly when children's health deteriorates during the economic downturn.

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