



RESEARCH BRIEF

The impact of the Covid-19 crisis on children, families and inequalities in early childhood development (ECD)

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Claire Dunne

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research brief is to assess the known and likely impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic for children and families, especially those who Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP) works with.

Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) is caused by a new strain of Coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) discovered in 2019 and not previously identified in humans. The World Health Organisation (WHO) announced the current Covid-19 outbreak as a pandemic on 11 March 2020.¹

The Covid-19 pandemic—and the governmental and societal response to its spread—is having profound effects throughout society. This paper draws on research and think pieces published nationally and internationally on Covid-19, and previous public health crises, to identify the immediate (known) effects for children and families and to explore the possible intermediate and long-term effects.

The impact of Covid-19 is being assessed daily at a national and international level. Where possible, LEAP is looking to examine the evidence to assess how this research applies on a local level to LEAP's work and the children and families we work with. The findings detailed here include research published in the past few months in relation to the Covid-19 crisis and research published in response to previous public health crises internationally.

In March 2020 the British government introduced measures to attempt to control the spread of Covid-19. These measures have had profound effects on life in the UK. They include:

- On Friday 20 March all schools, colleges and nurseries in England were directed to close “until further notice.”²
- On Monday 23 March the British government introduced restrictive measures to the UK for an initial three week period in an attempt to limit the spread of Covid-19.³ The measures were focused on reducing contact between people from different households and meant that people could only leave their home if they were: shopping for basic necessities; fulfilling a medical need; travelling for work purposes (where working from home was not possible); or were exercising once a day either alone or with a member of their household.

¹https://cgf.cochrane.org/news/covid-19-coronavirus-disease-fertility-and-pregnancy#163961_20200401045239

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/18/coronavirus-school-colleges-nurseries-england-close-uk-friday>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others>

- On Thursday 16 April the restrictions were extended for at least three weeks following a review of the initial three week lockdown period.⁴

While there is a certain universality in the experience of Covid-19, the political responses and demographics of each country mean that at a country level people's experiences will vary. Nonetheless, the research and think pieces included here offer important insights, although the context they operate in is important to keep in mind. Where possible the country that the research originates from is stated next to the publication, to offer this context.

This research brief covers the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on children, families and inequalities in early childhood development linked to LEAP's priority areas:

- **Social implications**
- **Physical health**
 - *Child diet and nutrition*
 - *Child access to outdoor and green space*
- **Mental health and wellbeing**
 - *Parental and household mental health*
 - *Child and adolescent mental health*
- **Education**
 - *Educational inequalities*
- **Financial implications**
 - *Household income*
 - *Child poverty*
- **Vulnerable children and families**
 - *Inadequate housing*
 - *Domestic abuse*
 - *Single parent families*
 - *Looked-after children and children with special educational needs or a disability (SEND)*

SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS

We can reasonably assume that the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic will not affect all those within society equally. This is outlined by Jack Shonkoff from the Harvard Centre for the Developing Child (US)⁵:

- The COVID-19 pandemic has the capacity to affect every person in the world—and how each individual responds can potentially affect everyone else;
- The immediate effects and long-term impacts of this rapidly changing situation will not be evenly distributed;
- Acting on the best available and most credible scientific knowledge has never been more essential, yet science by itself does not have all the answers.

Similarly, Dr Jo Casebourne from the Early Intervention Foundation (UK)⁶ observes that, while it will take time to understand the impact of the contextual changes that Covid-19 has on early intervention work, it is possible to make some early assumptions:

- A number of existing wider societal challenges are likely to become even more acute: child poverty is likely to rise, as is stress and conflict within families, and the incidence of mental health problems among children and adolescents.

⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-52313715>

⁵ <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/stress-resilience-and-the-role-of-science-responding-to-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>

⁶ <https://www.eif.org.uk/blog/coronavirus-and-early-intervention-confronting-a-new-world-for-families-children-and-vital-services>

- Many of the traditional routes by which early intervention is actually delivered have suddenly ceased to exist or substantially shrunk:
 - schools have shut for most children;
 - health services are understandably prioritising acute health concerns;
 - local authorities will be forced into difficult decisions about their provision of statutory and other services;
 - the serious scaling-back of face-to-face services, such as health visiting or social worker contact, will reduce the opportunities to identify children and families at risk or to provide much-needed support.
- This national emergency also comes on top of long-term trends that have seen increasing numbers of children living in poverty, which will make it very hard for many families to manage in 'lockdown' and through any long period of social distancing that follows.
- Lastly, however unclear the specifics might be right now, this new world we all find ourselves in is likely to bring about important changes in the *demand* for early intervention.
- Just as significant as the precipitous drop in access to education settings, social services and out-patient healthcare, is the corresponding jump in the importance of the home, and of the relationships between family members, between parent couples, and between parents and children.
- Suddenly, the home is the sole locus for supporting most children's education and personal development, all while parents contend with the loss of jobs or income, or trying to balance working at home with parenting and schooling, the uncertainty of day-to-day practicalities, and the simple and understandable stresses of spending so much more time together in close quarters.
- The evidence is clear on the link between stress at home, parenting, and the potential for negative impacts on children's long-term outcomes.

A think piece from the University of Birmingham (UK)⁷ confirms this point:

- In the case of almost all kinds of economic, social, political or health-related systemic shocks, the vulnerable are the most severely impacted.
- The economic shocks will be significant and will disproportionately affect low-skilled workers and low-income households, regardless of whether or not they contract the virus.
- A recent headline stated that there will be more bankruptcies than deaths from the Covid-19 [pandemic]. This is not to diminish the importance of the personal losses being experienced, but to point to the additional risks faced by those who have the least in our society.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Owing to the closure of schools and childcare provision, children's daily lives have been disrupted during the Covid-19 crisis. Consequently, the amount of movement a child makes in any given day is likely to decrease, especially if they have limited access to outdoor or green space. Similarly, children who are reliant on the structure of school or nursery for one or two meals a day are likely to be negatively impacted by this disruption.

CHILD DIET AND NUTRITION

Children may experience an increase or decrease in nutritional intake during the period of school closure. The New England Journal of Medicine (US)⁸ explored the challenge of feeding low-income children during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the possible risks involved with failing to do so.

- Nearly 35 million children are served by the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs in the US daily.

⁷<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/thebirminghambrief/items/2020/03/contagion-the-economic-and-social-impacts-of-covid-19-on-our-region.aspx>

⁸<https://www.nejm.org/doi/10.1056/NEJMp2005638>

- Meals and snacks from schools or childcare centres fulfil up to two thirds of children's daily nutritional needs and are generally healthier than those brought from home.
- The short-term health effects of missed meals include fatigue and reduced immune response, which increase the risk of contracting communicable diseases. Even brief periods of food insecurity can cause long-term developmental, psychological, physical, and emotional harms.
- Children from low-income households, who are already at higher risk for poorer health and academic performance than children from high-income households, may be further disadvantaged by nutrition shortfalls.

Another risk factor related to schools closing is the possibility that children may gain weight due to lower value nutritional food and less access to outdoor space. The obesity society (US)⁹ anticipates the pandemic's longer-term effect on children's health:

- The COVID-19 pandemic will likely double out-of-school time this year for many children in the U.S. and will exacerbate the risk factors for weight gain associated with summer recess.

The Education Endowment Foundation's (UK)¹⁰ chief executive, Prof. Becky Francis, outlines the value of schools as the 'fourth emergency service' and identifies the very real threat of school closures for children who are eligible for free school meals:

- The Department for Education have committed to ensuring there will still be provision for the most vulnerable children, as well as a free school meals voucher system. However, we should be under no illusions about the potentially devastating impact that the combination of economic hardship and school closures will have on the poorest children and young people in our society.
- Schools don't just educate pupils, they care for them in a whole range of ways—feeding, safeguarding, enriching—and, though the whole sector will do its best to support those families least able to cope, there will be challenges to reach all that need help.
- Given the urgent impetus to ensure that pupils are fed and looked after, there will be a need to ensure that a focus on supporting the learning of pupils from disadvantaged families is kept firmly in sight.
- The majority of 18 year-olds eligible for free school meals leave education without a good standard of recognised qualifications in English and maths. It's vital, then, that as a society we do all we can to alleviate this impact.

CHILD ACCESS TO OUTDOOR AND GREEN SPACE

The benefit and importance of access to outdoor space for physical and mental health—for both children and adults—is well documented. However, due to housing inequalities, access to these opportunities are often tied to household income; families from lower income groups are less likely to have direct access to a garden or local green space. The IPPR's (UK) report, *Children of the Pandemic*,¹¹ explores the challenge that government restrictions on the frequency of exercise households are entitled to each day pose for children from low-income groups:

- An estimated 28% of children aged two to 15 are overweight or obese.
- Children aged five from the poorest income groups are twice as likely to be obese compared to their most well-off counterparts, and by age 11 they are three times as likely.
- While children can exercise indoors, evidence shows that exercise outside brings additional benefits to mental wellbeing that are not seen with similar levels of indoor physical activity.

⁹ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/oby.22813>

¹⁰ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/chief-executives-letter-school-closures-the-disadvantage-gap-may-widen-but-there-are-practical-steps-we-can-take-to-minimise-it/>

¹¹ https://www.ippr.org/files/2020-03/1585586431_children-of-the-pandemic.pdf

- Local parks account for 90% of all green spaces used by people. The majority can visit [these spaces] on foot. As such, these will be particularly important for those children without a garden.

However, on 10 April 2020 the Guardian published a research piece exploring the amount of space available to those living in London which found that those living in deprived areas, and those from BAME backgrounds, share less space and have less access to private gardens and parks, according to an examination of mapping data.¹² The findings include:

- London is the UK's most densely populated region and the lockdown has led to pressure on public green space;
 - A third of all land in the wealthiest 10% of London wards is taken up by private gardens, compared to just over a fifth in the poorest 10%.
- These findings suggest households in the most deprived areas would be disproportionately affected by further park closures if lockdown restrictions became more severe.
 - Population density was also greatest in the poorest deciles meaning more people share less space.
 - In the poorest decile, around half the residents were BAME on average, more than double the proportion in the richest decile, where 20% were non-white¹³.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

The impact that the Covid-19 crisis is having, and will continue to have, on adult's and children's mental health and wellbeing cannot be underestimated. Researchers are scrambling to measure the immediate impact that the lockdown measures are having on households. To anticipate the longer-term impact that the crisis is likely to have, researchers are examining the impact that previous public health crises have had on people's mental health and wellbeing. Again, those children and families who were dealing with mental health concerns prior to the Covid-19 crisis are likely to be the most vulnerable to its impact.

PARENTAL AND HOUSEHOLD MENTAL HEALTH

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) (UK), conducted an online survey of 1,581 adults in Great Britain between 27 March 2020 and 6 April 2020 (inclusive).¹⁴ The Opinions and Lifestyle Survey sought to explore the impact of the government's Stay at Home measures introduced on Monday 23 March. The survey showed over 4 in 5 adults in Great Britain (84.2%) said they were 'very worried' or 'somewhat worried' about the effect that COVID-19 is having on their life with over half of adults (53.1%) saying it was affecting their well-being. The availability of medication, groceries and essentials was found to be one of the greatest concerns.¹⁵ The findings are outlined in Figure 1 below.

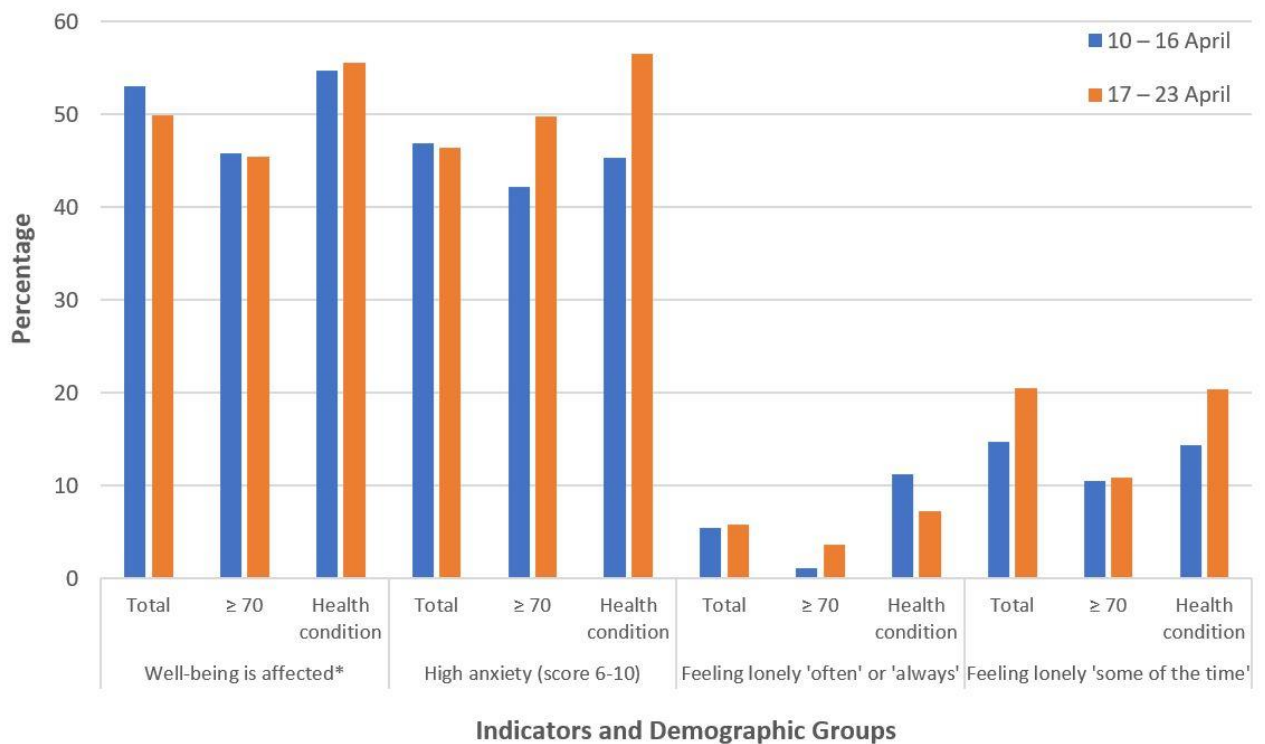
¹² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/apr/10/coronavirus-park-closures-hit-bame-and-poor-londoners-most#maincontent>

¹³ All deprivation comparisons are based on the 2015 deprivation data at [ward level for 2015](#) as published by Public Health England. (The 2015 data does not give a [London region](#) deprivation score, therefore the median deprivation score has been used for comparison). Because of differences in ward boundaries between 2005 and 2015, the analysis is based on 483 of 659 areas (or 73%) of London boroughs.

¹⁴ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthandwellbeing/bulletins/coronavirusandthesocialimpactsongreatbritain/16april2020>

¹⁵ <https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2020/04/16/ons-publishes-new-data-on-covid-19-deaths-and-the-social-and-economic-impacts-of-virus-pandemic/>

Figure 1: Indicators of well-being in Great Britain during the Covid-19 crisis



Source: Office for National Statistics – Opinions and Lifestyle Survey.¹⁶

Notes. *This question was only asked of those who said they were very worried or worried about the impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19) but the base population for these estimates is all adults aged 16 years or over to reflect the level of concern among the whole population. These estimates are calculated using Table 2b of the datasets in the Coronavirus and the social impacts on Great Britain: 23 April 2020 release. Demographic groups indicated refer to: Total (all persons total); ≥ 70 (70 years old or over); Health condition (any specific health condition).

The Lancet Psychiatry Journal (UK) published a call for action to highlight the need to prioritise mental health research in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis.¹⁷ The paper cites compelling reasons to invest in this research; the authors anticipate an increase in mild and acute mental health symptoms and conditions.

- The potential fallout of an economic downturn on mental health is likely to be profound on those directly affected.
- There is a risk that [the number] of people with anxiety, depression, and engaging in harmful behaviours (such as suicide and self harm) will increase. A rise in suicide is not inevitable, especially with national mitigation efforts.
- Many of the anticipated consequences of quarantine and associated social and physical distancing measures are themselves key risk factors for mental health issues. These include suicide and self-harm, alcohol and substance misuse, gambling, domestic and child abuse, and psychosocial risks (such as social disconnection, lack of meaning or anomie, entrapment, cyberbullying, feeling a burden, financial stress, bereavement, loss, unemployment, homelessness, and relationship breakdown).
- A major adverse consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to be increased social isolation and loneliness, which are strongly associated with anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicide attempts across the lifespan. Tracking loneliness and intervening early are important priorities. Crucially, reducing sustained feelings of loneliness and promoting belongingness are protective measures to protect against suicide, self-harm, and emotional problems.

¹⁶<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronavirustheukeconomyandsocietyfasterindicators/latest#coronavirus-and-the-social-impacts-on-great-britain>

¹⁷[https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanpsy/PIIS2215-0366\(20\)30168-1.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanpsy/PIIS2215-0366(20)30168-1.pdf)

The Lancet article outlines research into the impact that the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2003 had in Hong Kong and Toronto:

- The epidemic was associated with a 30% increase in suicide in those aged 65 years and older;
- Around 50% of recovered patients remained anxious;
- 29% of health-care workers experienced probable emotional distress;
- Patients who survived severe and life-threatening illness were at risk of post-traumatic stress disorder and depression.

Researchers from the University of Sheffield (UK) and Ulster University (UK) conducted a psychological survey of 2,000 British adults between 23 and 27 March 2020 using standardised measures of mental health.¹⁸

- The findings reflected that the day after the announcement of a lockdown, 38% of participants reported significant depression and 36% reported significant anxiety. On the day before the announcement, 16% reported significant depression and 17% reported significant anxiety.
- The study found that 25% of women and 18% of men exhibited clinically meaningful symptoms of anxiety, 23% of women and 21% of men showed signs of depression, and 15% of women and 19% of men were stressed. These results are elevated compared to those of similar surveys from before the coronavirus crisis, such as the Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey (in which 15.7% reported common psychiatric disorders), but not dramatically so.
- Those aged under 35, living in a city, living alone or with children, with lower incomes, with health conditions and those whose incomes had been hit by the pandemic had higher rates of anxiety and depression.
- Those who felt that they belonged to their neighbourhood and who trusted their neighbours had lower levels of anxiety and depression.
- The study found that 32% of people had already lost income due to the pandemic, when asked to rate their level of worry about the financial impact so far on a scale of 0 (not worried at all) to 10 (extremely worried), the average response was around six.

CHILD AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH

The Lancet Journal of Child and Adolescent Health acknowledge that children are likely to be affected by the mental health of the adults they are living with. Their article *Protecting the psychological health of children through effective communication about COVID-19*¹⁹ explores the risks present to children's mental health at this time, and ways to protect it.

- In this rapidly changing situation, media and social conversations are entirely dominated by the outbreak, and children are exposed to large amounts of information and high levels of stress and anxiety in the adults around them.
- Simultaneously, children are experiencing substantial changes to their daily routine and social infrastructure, which ordinarily foster resilience to challenging events.
- Research shows that even children as young as 2 years are aware of the changes around them. Even children younger than 2 years will notice the absence of regular caregivers (e.g., grandparents) and become unsettled and upset, seeking their return.
- Adults need to be authentic about some of the uncertainty and psychological challenges of the pandemic without overwhelming children with their own fears. This honesty not only offers a coherent explanation for what children are observing, but also grants permission for children to safely talk about their own feelings.

¹⁸ <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/news/nr/depression-anxiety-spiked-after-lockdown-announcement-coronavirus-mental-health-psychology-study-1.885549>

¹⁹ [https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanchi/PIIS2352-4642\(20\)30097-3.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanchi/PIIS2352-4642(20)30097-3.pdf)

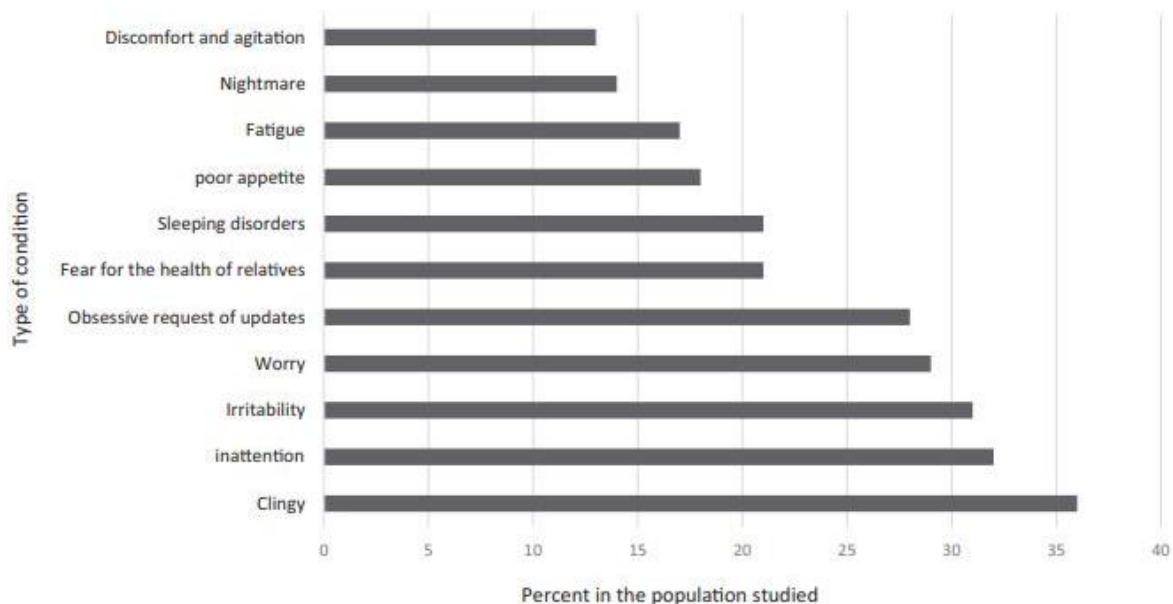
- Normalising their emotional reactions and reassuring children about how the family will look after each other helps to contain anxiety and provides a shared focus.
- Mental health responses to previous emergencies and disasters have included widespread psychological first aid, focusing on psychoeducation about normative reactions and coping strategies.
- Providing information and prioritising communication with children about COVID-19 is an essential component of any universal, community-led response to the pandemic.
- Health-care workers are experiencing unprecedented demands caring for a predominantly adult patient population, magnifying the invisibility of children’s urgent psychological needs.
- However, ignoring the immediate and long-term psychological effects of this global situation would be unconscionable, especially for children and young people, who account for 42% of our world’s population.

The European Paediatric Association has an article in press which explores the *Behavioural and Emotional Reactions to COVID-19* in Chinese children.²⁰ The preliminary report from the Chinese province of Shaanxi includes useful information for professionals involved in the care of children affected by the current and possible future epidemics:

- [Children] experience fears, uncertainties, physical and social isolation and may miss school for a prolonged period.

Figure 2, taken from the article, illustrates the percentage of children who experienced symptoms of psychological conditions during the Covid-19 epidemic in the Shaanxi province.

Figure 2: Children reporting psychological conditions during the Covid-19 epidemic in the Shaanxi province, China



Source: European Paediatric Association.

Note. Children ($n = 320$) aged 3-18 reporting psychological conditions during the Covid-19 epidemic in the Shaanxi province, China (25 January – 8 February 2020).

²⁰ [https://www.jpeds.com/article/S0022-3476\(20\)30336-X/pdf](https://www.jpeds.com/article/S0022-3476(20)30336-X/pdf)

An article published in the JAMA Paediatrics Journal (US) highlights the mental health risks associated with social distancing for children and adolescents. In the article, *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and Mental Health for Children and Adolescents*,²¹ published 14 April 2020, researchers outline the risk factors which may contribute to increased—or worsening—mental health concerns among children and adolescents:

- The COVID-19 pandemic may worsen existing mental health problems and lead to more cases among children and adolescents because of the unique combination of the public health crisis, social isolation, and economic recession.
- Economic downturns are associated with increased mental health problems for youth that may be affected by the ways that economic downturns affect adult unemployment, adult mental health, and child maltreatment.
- One potentially overlooked role played by schools is the delivery of health care, and especially of mental health services. Schools have long served as a de facto mental health system for many children and adolescents.
- Data from the nationally representative National Survey of Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) (US) include information on mental health services for children age 12 to 17 years and illustrate the implications of school closures on access to mental health services:
 - An analysis of the 2014 NSDUH found that 13.2% of adolescents received a mental health service from a school setting in the past 12 months, corresponding to 3 million adolescents²².
 - An analysis of the 2012 to 2015 NSDUH found that, of all adolescents who used a mental health service in the year, 57% received some school-based mental health services.
- Adolescents in racial and ethnic minority groups, with lower family income, or with public health insurance, were disproportionately likely to receive mental health services exclusively from school settings.
- These students may lack the family resources and existing relationships with clinicians to quickly gain access to alternative community-based services. Policy makers should consider responses to address COVID-19's short-term disruptions for children's mental health services while also laying groundwork to improve children's mental health services in the long term.

Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner for England, published a blog "*Angry, fed up, isolated*": *Coronavirus and children's mental health*²³ (3 April 2020), which reflected research findings on children's mental health prior to, and during, the Covid-19 crisis.

- The millions of children who are already growing up in vulnerable circumstances—those living in poverty, care or have special needs, or those who are already struggling with their mental health—are going to be facing particularly difficult times [during the Covid-19 crisis].
- When times are turbulent, schools are closed and already hard-pressed services are losing staff to either sickness or redeployment, the gap for vulnerable children to fall through becomes that much wider.
- [In March], we asked 2,000 children aged 8 to 17 years old whether they ever feel stressed, what in particular makes them feel stressed, what it's like to feel stressed and what they do to feel less stressed.
- 88% of children surveyed said that they 'had ever felt stressed'. This work coincided with the growing coronavirus crisis, and not surprisingly many children told us that the virus was their biggest reason for feeling stressed.
- Childline have reported an increased demand in counselling sessions [since the Covid-19 crisis].

²¹ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2764730>

²² This includes a mix of adolescents who attend a regular school and receive services from a mental health clinician there and adolescents who attend a special school or a special program at a regular school for behavioural or emotional problems.

²³ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/04/03/angry-fed-up-isolated-coronavirus-and-childrens-mental-health/>

- A Young Minds survey [in March] of children with a history of mental health needs showed 83% saying the pandemic has made their mental health 'a bit' or 'much worse'.
- The lack of socialising, worries about families' health, school closures and a loss of routine are all contributing to their worries.
- While three quarters of those surveyed said they were still able to have access to mental health support, usually online, a quarter were not receiving help.
- Another survey at the end of [March] shows that over half of parents worried about their children's mental health during this time; and parents' main worries were ensuring they have enough food supplies (48%), supporting children with schoolwork (44%) and money (39%).
- In our survey, when asked what they would do to manage stress, a quarter of those children who ever feel stressed said that they would normally go outside. Now this option is only very limited. 43% said that they would hang out with their friends, family or pets.
- Whilst many children are getting more time with immediate family, their time with their extended family and friends has been significantly reduced. For those with laptops and smartphones they can connect with friends through social media and use messaging apps to video call friends and family, but for those without, they are more isolated than ever.
- It will be equally important that once the crisis has passed children struggling with their mental health are able to access the support and help they need. While mental health services for children are slowly improving, we are still a decade away from providing every child who needs access to mental health services the treatment they need.

EDUCATION

It is estimated that Covid-19 has prompted school closures in 188 countries, affecting more than 1.5 billion students.²⁴ While these school closures will undoubtedly have profound effects for both teachers and students, the effects will not be felt equally by all.

The Sutton Trust's (UK) *Impact Briefing: School Closures* (20 April 2020)²⁵ outlines the risks and barriers that school closures hold for children from disadvantaged backgrounds:

- While some parents will be able to spend large amounts of time supporting their children or be able to spend money on additional tuition or on educational resources, other children will be trying to work in cramped housing conditions, with inadequate access to learning technology or stable internet, and with parents less able to support their learning.
- Due to the economic impact of the crisis, more children are also likely to be facing challenges which indirectly impact on attainment, such as poverty or food insecurity, along with the stress of financial worries, and some will not have the resources needed to access learning online at all.

EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

Prior to the Covid-19 crisis the educational attainment gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their non-disadvantaged peers was well documented. The Sutton Trust state that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are twice as likely to leave formal education without GCSEs in English and maths compared to their better-off classmates. Furthermore, these gaps are established early:

- Children from disadvantaged backgrounds who achieve high marks at primary school are twenty percentage points less likely to achieve top marks at GCSE than their better-off peers with the same previous attainment.²⁶

²⁴ <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/04/ending-coronavirus-lockdowns-will-be-dangerous-process-trial-and-error>

²⁵ <https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-Impact-Brief-School-Shutdown.pdf>

²⁶ Ibid.

The best proxy measures for economic disadvantage in school-age children are students who are: eligible for free school meals; assessed as having special educational needs; in care or have been adopted from care.^{27 28} The Children's Commissioner for England states that, in 2019, 26.5% (144,000) of students in state-funded schools at the end of key stage 4 (age 16) were disadvantaged.²⁹ Of these pupils, just a quarter achieved English and Maths at grades 9-5, compared to half of non-disadvantaged pupils.

The Lancet Global Health Journal published an article on 26 March 2020: *Considering inequalities in the school closure response to COVID-19*,³⁰ which explores the likely impacts of school closures for disadvantaged children.

- School closures impede learning and compound [educational] inequities, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged children.
- School closures during the Ebola epidemic (2014–16) increased dropouts, child labour, violence against children, teen pregnancies, and persisting socioeconomic and gender disparities.
- Access to distance learning through digital technologies is highly unequal, and subsidised meal programmes, vaccination clinics, and school nurses are essential to child health care, especially for marginalised communities.

The article states that, in addition to educational provision, schools ordinarily offer additional safeguarding support to children, especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

- Schools provide safeguarding and supervision, and closures increase the economic burden of families using day care or their reliance on vulnerable older relatives.
- Working parents might leave children unsupervised or forgo employment to stay at home with them.
- The UK's *Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy* acknowledges that "the benefit of school closure in reducing clinically important outcomes needs to be balanced against secondary adverse effects." This position aligns with the WHO–UNICEF–Lancet Commission's emphasis on addressing health, social, and educational factors so that children "survive and thrive".
- School closure measures should avoid exacerbating inequities, providing learning without digital technologies, childcare alternatives, and health care, including nutritional programmes. We must strike a balance, protecting those most at risk without sacrificing the next generation's future.

The Education Endowment Foundation's (UK) Chief Executive, Prof. Becky Francis, published a letter (23 March 2020)³¹ to highlight the risks involved with school closures. The risks are exacerbated for the most vulnerable families, Francis considers those most at risk to include families with young carers, parents without good English and those who might not qualify for statutory support. She states that schools should continue to play a vital role in supporting families by advising them where to go to get help.

Focusing on the attainment gap, Francis asserts that "we know that children learn less when they are not in school." She points to the evidence on summer learning loss—which affects all children but poor children most of all—as evidence of the likely impact of school closures. The attainment gap will "almost certainly widen when children are not in school".

Sian Griffiths, in *The Sunday Times* (22 March 2020),³² illustrated the experiences of the Covid-19 crisis for children and families from disadvantaged backgrounds. Griffiths interviewed the head teacher of an

²⁷ https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Annual_Reports/EEF_Attainment_Gap_Report_2018.pdf

²⁸ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/cco-tackling-the-disadvantage-gap-during-the-covid-19-crisis.pdf>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2214-109X%2820%2930116-9>

³¹ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/chief-executives-letter-school-closures-the-disadvantage-gap-may-widen-but-there-are-practical-steps-we-can-take-to-minimise-it/>

³² <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/coronavirus-my-teachers-know-theyll-get-sick-k9wlgmz9w>

Academy school in Blackpool who explained that many students already “dread school holidays” because they have “nothing to do or are reliant on free school meals.”

The head teacher said that she had spoken to parents who have “lost their jobs in the seaside town’s gig economy, leaving them struggling to buy food or pay electricity bills.” The head teacher explained that the school ordinarily “provide[s] the only hot meal these children have in a day. I worry that at home they will be living off a bag of crisps and a bag of Haribo [sweets]. One of my pupils was so hungry last year he was caught eating stationery.”

A survey by Teacher Tapp (UK)³³ illustrated the disparity between the IT infrastructure available at state and private schools, at both primary and secondary levels. The survey, completed by 6,360 teachers on 22 March 2020, found that private school teachers feel more confident using educational technology than state school teachers (33% versus 22% respectively).

The Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) (UK), in their publication *Children of the Pandemic*,³⁴ reassert that:

- Children living in mobile-only households or those without internet connection are at a clear educational disadvantage.
- 1 million children and their families do not have adequate access to a device or connectivity at home.
- While figures are unavailable for those under-16, more than a third (36%) of 16-24 year olds live in mobile-only households.

Sir Peter Lampl, founder and chairman of the Sutton Trust (UK) warned that the short-term effects of school closures are likely to lead to longer term impacts: “The widening of the attainment gap over these next few months threatens to have negative implications for years to come. It is crucial we do all we can to address inequalities.”³⁵

The Sutton Trust’s *Impact Brief: School Shutdown*³⁶, identify the home learning environment as having an even more crucial role during lockdown. The impact brief reports parent and teacher views collected from a survey conducted with Public First between 1-3 April 2020. Over three quarters of parents with a postgraduate degree, and just over 60% of those with an undergraduate degree, feel confident directing their child’s learning. In comparison, less than half of parents whose highest qualifications were GCSE or A levels felt confident to do so.

Considering the disparity of access to resources necessary for home learning, the Sutton Trust’s report identified that:

- In the most deprived schools, 15% of teachers report that over a third of their students learning from home would not have adequate access to an electronic device for learning, compared to only 2% in the most affluent state schools.
- 12% of [teachers] in the most deprived schools felt that more than a third of their students would not have adequate internet access.

The *Impact Brief: School Shutdown* summarises the challenge succinctly: “while children from disadvantaged backgrounds will likely need the most help at this time, they are the least likely to have access to the help and resources needed.”

³³ <https://teachertapp.co.uk/what-does-distance-learning-look-like-in-england-and-where-will-teachers-kids-be-today/>

³⁴ <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/children-of-the-pandemic>

³⁵ <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-how-lockdown-is-affecting-learning-for-working-class-pupils-11975696>

³⁶ <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief/>

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The economic impact of the Covid-19 crisis has been widely acknowledged. Some economists predict that Britain is “heading for the deepest recession in living memory.”³⁷ The International Monetary Fund warned that the world is facing its “greatest recession since the Great Depression.”³⁸ The effects of these economic crises, at a household, family and child level, will be profound.

HOUSEHOLD INCOME

Research has shown that families who were already struggling financially are likely to be disproportionately affected by the economic fallout. This is due to a combination of factors: these households will be more reliant on work within the so-called gig economy or zero hour contracts; they will have fewer savings to rely on, thereby depleting this resource sooner than their more financially secure counterparts. The New Statesman identifies that, in the UK, there are 4.7 million workers without a permanent contract.³⁹

Analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) (UK)^{40 41} states that many better-off households may increase their savings as spending on ‘banned’ activities (eating out, commuting, going on holiday and transport) falls. The richest fifth of the population spend far more as a proportion of their total spending on eating out and taking holidays (20%) than the poorest fifth (12%). As a result of this, the report outlines, richer households may be effectively forced into additional savings over this period. They will also be more resilient to falls in income. Because lower income households focus a higher share of their spending on necessities (55%) than higher income households (39%), they will be less resilient to any fall in income.

A cross-sectional survey of UK adults, led by academics from Imperial College London, reported key inequalities between individuals’ ability to adapt to the restrictions placed on society as a result of Covid-19.⁴² The survey examined those who have the ability to work from home and found that there was an association with an individual’s ability to work from home and their education level, household income, amount of savings and housing situation (Table 1). Overall, 44.3 percent of people could work from home (i.e. permitted by their employer and have the necessary equipment to do their job from home).

³⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/24/what-will-coronavirus-mean-for-the-british-economy>

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ <https://www.newstatesman.com/spotlight/coronavirus/2020/03/coronavirus-pandemic-highlights-gaping-holes-uk-s-social-safety-net>

⁴⁰ <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14796>

⁴¹ <https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/BN279-Household-spending-and-coronavirus-2.pdf>

⁴² <https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.04.01.20050039v1.full.pdf>

Table 1. Indicators influencing individual’s ability to work from home.

Indicator	Sub-group	Ability to work from home (%)
Highest qualification level	Degree level	62.6
	Post-secondary but below degree level	47.7
	Secondary or below	29.4
Household income	Highest (£50,000 and above)	22.7
	Lowest (£20,000 and below)	67.3
Amount of savings	£25,000 or more	59.9
	£100 or less	33.1
Housing	Homeowner	41
	Renting from LA or housing association	18.2
Overall Total		44.3

Source: (Atchison et al., 2020) Atchison, C. J., Bowman, L., Vrinten, C., Redd, R., Pristera, P., Eaton, J. W., & Ward, H. (2020). *Perceptions and behavioural responses of the general public during the COVID-19 pandemic: A cross-sectional survey of UK Adults [Preprint]. Public and Global Health.* <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.04.01.20050039>

An indirect impact of the financial crisis is the stress and worry that results from financial insecurity. The Opinions and Lifestyle Survey, conducted by the ONS, covering the period 27 March 2020 to 6 April 2020, identified that nearly 23% of adults were worried about the impact of Covid-19 on their household finances, primarily in relation to reduced income. Of these, 73% said they needed to use savings to cover living costs.⁴³

CHILD POVERTY

On 30 March 2020 the End Child Poverty Coalition cited government figures which stated that, prior to the Covid-19 crisis, child poverty across the UK had risen again.⁴⁴ 4.2 million children were living in relative poverty in 2018-19, after housing costs were been taken into account. This was a rise from 3.2 million children in 2010-11.

On 26 March 2020 The Children’s Society (UK)⁴⁵ explored the potential impact of Covid-19 on child poverty:

- Those on the lowest incomes—families living on less than half the average annual income—are likely to be the hardest hit by the [Covid-19] pandemic. These figures show the number of children living in severe poverty is now at 2.9 million, an increase of 100,000 since last year and up 600,000 in the last decade.

Action for Children published a press release on 23 March 2020 which details an investigation with practitioners working on the frontline.⁴⁶ The investigation reports one mother’s experience: “We’re literally living hand to mouth. I’m struggling mentally and trying not to panic, to hold the family together, but I’m also thinking ‘what next?’” Action for Children state that:

⁴³<https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2020/04/16/ons-publishes-new-data-on-covid-19-deaths-and-the-social-and-economic-impacts-of-virus-pandemic/>

⁴⁴<https://www.ncb.org.uk/news-opinion/news-highlights/fears-impact-coronavirus-children-latest-govt-figures-show-child>

⁴⁵ <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/news-and-blogs/press-releases/the-childrens-society-reacts-to-new-child-poverty-statistics>

⁴⁶<https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/news-and-blogs/press-releases/2020/march/childrens-charity-frontline-workers-warn-families-fear-going-under-during-coronavirus-outbreak/>

- Vulnerable families across the UK fear they won't be able to stay afloat during the coronavirus crisis.
- Nearly one in every three children⁴⁷ in the UK was living in poverty before the [Covid-19] crisis hit ... this unprecedented health and economic crisis is now set to force even more families to choose between feeding their children and paying bills.

Action for Children interviewed 29 service managers between 18 and 20 March 2020 to understand family's needs and concerns. In response to the question "*thinking about parents with financial worries, what are they most worried about having to afford/cut back on during the coronavirus outbreak?*", service managers reported parents as most worried about not being able to afford food, followed by electricity and gas, then nappies. Other concerns raised included access to baby formula and uncertainty over help paying the rent if parents can't work.

VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

INADEQUATE HOUSING

The Lancet (UK) published a comment piece on 31 March 2020 exploring the *Impacts of COVID-19 on vulnerable children in temporary accommodation in the UK*.⁴⁸ The article outlines numerous consequences for children and families experiencing homelessness while living in temporary or insecure accommodation (including staying with friends or family, sofa surfing, shelters, bed and breakfast lodging). The consequences outlined are direct and indirect and affect children's health, social and educational outcomes.

Several difficulties are identified in the article for young children (aged ≤ 5 years) living in temporary accommodation:

- They are perhaps the most susceptible to viral infection because of pre-existing conditions (e.g., diabetes, asthma, epilepsy, anxiety, depression).
- They rarely have the ability to self-isolate and adhere to social distancing, with previous extreme inequalities and inequities in accessing health care becoming exacerbated [during the Covid-19 crisis].
- They are not only at high risk of exposure and transmission due to overcrowding in substandard housing, but also of immediate and long-term effects on growth, optimal health, and brain development.

The article illustrates the extent of the problem:

- The total number of children who were homeless and in temporary accommodation increased to 126,020 in England in 2019, of whom 88,080 were in London.
- The Children's Commissioner suggested that there could be more than 210,000 homeless children in temporary accommodation or sofa surfing and approximately 585,000 who are either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless in England.

The article goes on to examine how the Covid-19 crisis will specifically impact children and families living in temporary or inadequate accommodation:

- Many families have to live in a single bedroom with shared kitchen and toilet facilities, causing overcrowding and making self-isolation impossible in confined spaces.
- Often, children have inadequate space to crawl or play and no access to fresh air.

⁴⁷ 4.1 million children (30%) were living in poverty in the UK in 2017/18. These children were living in households with a relative low-income (after housing costs). Department for Work and Pensions (2019). National Statistics: Households below average income: 1994/95 to 2017/18. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-199495-to-201718>

⁴⁸ <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2468-2667%2820%2930080-3>

- No regulation on temporary accommodation exists regarding what is deemed suitable or how long someone can stay in temporary housing. With COVID-19, these children will stay in temporary accommodation for extended periods because no applications or services are being processed or provided.
- Handwashing and hygiene are reduced because of minimal access to soap, water, disinfectants, and bathrooms.
- No face-to-face contact with general practitioners and health outreach services is available, including health visitors, which limits routine checks such as early identification of need and risk, health and development reviews with screening assessments, immunisations, promotion of social and emotional development, support for parenting, promotion of health and behavioural change, prevention of obesity, and promotion of breastfeeding.
- For these families, access to basic essentials (e.g., food, nappies) is scarce, with no resources to shop online and many charities and drop-ins now closed. Additionally, they do not have regular support services (e.g., legal advice, weekly allowances, housing or immigration, online access to resources from the National Health Service via Wi-Fi).
- Risks to parental mental health are increased, especially among single mothers, given that housing instability is associated with an increased risk of depression in mothers.

DOMESTIC ABUSE

The NCBI (US) explored the “unintended, negative consequences” of the restrictive measures implemented to tackle the spread of Covid-19 in their article *The pandemic paradox: the consequences of COVID-19 on domestic violence*.⁴⁹

- As the virus continues to spread across the world, it brings with it multiple new stresses, including physical and psychological health risks, isolation and loneliness, the closure of many schools and businesses, economic vulnerability and job losses.
- Through all of that, children (and their mothers) are particularly vulnerable (End Violence against Children, 2020) to the risk of domestic violence.
- Domestic violence refers to a range of violations that happen within a domestic space. It is a broad term that encompasses intimate partner violence (IPV), a form of abuse that is perpetrated by a current or ex-partner.

UNICEF published a press release on 20 March 2020 titled *COVID-19: Children at heightened risk of abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence amidst intensifying containment measures*⁵⁰ which highlights the danger of not offering tailored gender-specific responses:

- Control measures that do not account for the gender-specific needs and vulnerabilities of women and girls may also increase their risk of sexual exploitation, abuse and child marriage.
- Recent anecdotal evidence from China, for instance, points to a significant rise in cases of domestic violence against women and girls.
- While the UK government is rightly taking action to ensure people are protected from the disease, children will inevitably feel the impacts of school closures and social isolation.

The Developing World Bioethics Journal warns of the potential dangers of the Covid-19 restrictions for women and girls by examining responses to previous health emergencies in *Lessons Never Learned: Crisis and gender-based violence* (8 April 2020).⁵¹

⁴⁹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/research/coronavirus/publication/32281158>

⁵⁰ <https://www.unicef.org.uk/press-releases/covid-19-children-at-heightened-risk-of-abuse-neglect-exploitation-and-violence-amidst-intensifying-containment-measures-unicef/>

⁵¹ <https://doi.org/10.1111/dewb.12261>

- The COVID-19 pandemic exposes underlying inequalities in our socio-economic and health systems, such as gender-based violence (GBV).
- In emergencies, particularly ones that involve quarantine, GBV often increases.
- Women's and girls' vulnerability in crises are further exacerbated by the lack of access to their regular social networks and sources of social support, as well as health and other support services.
- Their exposure to violence increases as perpetrators might lash-out due to the economic strain caused by a pandemic, while their chances of leaving or resisting abusive relationships diminish.
- Early evidence from China suggests that domestic violence has dramatically increased: a police station in China's Hubei Province recorded a tripling of domestic violence reports in February 2020 during the COVID-19 quarantine.
- Groups working on domestic violence have reported that measures such as quarantines and social distancing have increased women's exposure to violence as confinement in physical spaces along with economic and health shocks have increased household stress levels. Support services are heavily strained due to the outbreak, particularly the healthcare and police services.
- Reports suggest that police have been reluctant to intervene and detain perpetrators due to COVID-19 outbreaks in prisons. In some locations, authorities have reportedly converted women's shelters into homeless shelters. UN Women has expressed concern that vital GBV health services may be diverted to deal with the outbreak.

In the UK, there has been a concerning increase in the number of domestic abuse reports. On 15 April 2020 The Guardian⁵² stated that:

- At least 16 suspected domestic abuse killings in the UK have been identified by campaigners since the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions were imposed, far higher than the average rate for the time of year.
- Karen Ingala Smith, the founder of Counting Dead Women, a pioneering project that records the killing of women by men in the UK, has identified at least 16 killings between 23 March and 12 April 2020, including those of children. Looking at the same period over the last 10 years, Smith's data records an average of five deaths.
- Her findings for 2020, which are collated from internet searches and people contacting over social media, were raised during evidence to the home affairs select committee on 15 April 2020.

Smith warned that it is important to be careful when interpreting these figures:

- "We have to be cautious about how we talk about increases in men killing women. Over the last 10 years, in the UK, a woman has been killed by a man every three days, by a partner or ex-partner, every four days. So, if this was averaged out, we might expect to see seven women killed in 21 days. In reality, there are always times when the numbers are higher or lower."
- "But we can say that the number of women killed by men over the first three weeks since lockdown is the highest it's been for at least 11 years and is double that of an average 21 days over the last 10 years."
- Smith's research shows at least seven people have been allegedly killed by partners or former partners during the period, while three people have been allegedly killed by their father.

The Chief Executive of Refuge (UK)⁵³, Sandra Horley CBE, published a response to Covid-19 which addressed the risks present to domestic abuse victims during lockdown:

- 1.6 million women experienced domestic abuse [in 2019], and self-isolation has the potential to aggravate pre-existing abusive behaviours by perpetrators.

⁵² <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/15/domestic-abuse-killings-more-than-double-amid-covid-19-lockdown>

⁵³ <https://www.refuge.org.uk/refuge-responds-to-covid-19/>

- While in lockdown or self-isolation, women and children are likely to be spending concentrated periods of time with perpetrators, potentially escalating the threat of domestic abuse and further restricting their freedom.
- Domestic abuse isn't always physical – it's a pattern of controlling, threatening and coercive behaviour, which can also be emotional, economic, psychological or sexual. Isolation is already used by many perpetrators as a tool of control.
- Lines of communication could be severely limited if women are unable to leave the home.

BBC News reported, on 20 April 2020,⁵⁴ that the National Domestic Abuse helpline has seen a 25% increase in calls since the lockdown. This pattern has been identified in other European countries. The article reports that France has seen a 32% rise in reported domestic violence cases and Spain has seen a 12% increase in calls to their gender violence hotline since lockdowns began.

SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

Single parent families are likely to feel the strain of balancing work, childcare and home schooling during the lockdown measures. The IPPR's (UK) research report, *Children of the Pandemic*,⁵⁵ identify that the impact of the childcare crisis experienced during the Covid-19 pandemic will affect men and women differently; "The vast majority of lone parents in the UK are women."

The charity Gingerbread (UK), which supports single parent families, have published guidance on how to support single parent families through the Covid-19 crisis.⁵⁶ The guidance outlines the risk factors present for single parent households, who are:

- Twice as likely as coupled households to live in poverty;
- More likely than coupled households to be in a low paying insecure job including on a zero or a low hours contract;
- More likely than couple parents to have to rely on the safety net of social security including the +775,000 single parent households who have transferred onto universal credit;
- More likely than coupled households to live in a private rented sector home; and
- More likely than couples to have to rely on formal childcare.

LOOKED-AFTER CHILDREN AND CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OR A DISABILITY (SEND)

In the IPPR report *Children of the Pandemic*, the authors offer a brief reminder of the challenges presented to looked-after children and children with special educational needs or a disability (SEND) during the Covid-19 crisis:

- For the 78,000 looked-after children and young people in the UK, this period brings fresh uncertainty, for example if foster or 'kinship' carers or staff at children's homes become ill.
- This context will also bring significant new challenges for the 1.3 million children who have special educational needs or a disability (SEND), as well as for their families and carers, as the respite care and facilities they depend on are unavailable.

⁵⁴[https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-52229828?xtor=ES-208-\[31391_News_NLB_Wk17_Mon_20_Apr_ACT\]-20200420-\[bbcnews_sixways_newsuk_sixways\]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/explainers-52229828?xtor=ES-208-[31391_News_NLB_Wk17_Mon_20_Apr_ACT]-20200420-[bbcnews_sixways_newsuk_sixways])

⁵⁵ <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/children-of-the-pandemic>

⁵⁶ <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/covid-19-briefing/>

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