

Written evidence submitted by Understanding Society,  
Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex

**Written evidence submitted by *Understanding Society*, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, University of Essex**

**Key points**

- *Understanding Society*, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, is a world-leading longitudinal survey of continuity and change in UK life.
- In April 2020, we began a regular new survey to look at the impact of Covid-19 on the UK population.
- Our evidence shows the unequal impact of school closures on advantaged and disadvantaged children, and on ethnic minorities, as well as the impact on children's mental health.
- In the first lockdown, 90% of children got school work at home, but under a third (32%) had one or more live lessons a day.
- During April 2020, 74% of private school pupils had full school days, compared to 38% of state school pupils.
- Secondary school children with their own computer spent 3.8 hours per day on school work, compared to 2.6 hours for more disadvantaged children who had to share a computer.
- Children with Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds spent the least amount of time on home learning and were overrepresented in not receiving distance teaching.
- Mothers reported a substantial increase in children's behavioural and emotional difficulties during the pandemic.
- Wellbeing was higher when children returned to school, but still much lower than pre-pandemic levels.
- Additional support for children's mental health and wellbeing is likely to be required for some time.

**1. Introduction**

1.1. *Understanding Society*, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, is a world-leading longitudinal survey of continuity and change in UK life. From an initial sample of around 40,000 households, the same people are invited to participate in annual surveys. Together with its predecessor, the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), the data now span more than 25 years. *Understanding Society* is based at the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex.

1.2. *Understanding Society* is primarily funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), part of UK Research and Innovation, and is supported by a number of Government departments and devolved administrations. Anonymised data from the surveys are made available to registered researchers to use in their own research projects.

1.3 In April, *Understanding Society* began a regular new survey to look at the impact of coronavirus on the UK population. 42,000 adult participants across the UK were invited to take part, and 17,450 participants completed the survey in the first Wave. There were questions about each household's employment and financial situation, but also about health, caring responsibilities and loneliness.

1.4 The Covid-19 survey has been made available to researchers with data from previous waves of the study from before the pandemic, allowing for comparisons of lives before and during Covid-19.

## **2. Most children got school work, but only a third had online lessons – evidence from *Understanding Society***

2.1 In April 2020, the vast majority of children were not at school, but 90% were given school work to do at home.

2.2 Most of the school work was 'offline' in the form of worksheets, assignments or video clips to watch, with a minority of children getting live online lessons from teachers. Just under a third of students (32%) had one or more online live lessons a day.

2.3 Most students who got homework and submitted it also got feedback on it. 65% said at least half the homework was checked by teachers.

2.4 Boys spent less time studying than girls – 58% of boys spent more than two hours a day on their school work, compared to 70% of girls.

2.5 There was also a gender divide among parents, with mothers spending nine more hours than fathers doing childcare and home schooling per week.

## **3. Emerging inequalities between state and private sectors – research using *Understanding Society***

3.1 Just four in 10 school pupils received full-time schooling during April 2020, with a quarter receiving no teaching at all. In early October, only around six in 10 pupils were taught full-time.

3.2 During April 2020, nearly three quarters (74%) of private school pupils had full school days, compared to 38% of state school pupils.

## **4. Educational loss for disadvantaged children – research using *Understanding Society***

4.1 The transition from face-to-face schooling to distance schooling (at home) is likely to generate educational loss, which will be more pronounced for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

4.2 Children in the most advantaged families, where they had their own computer, spent on average 2.9 hours per day on school work for primary and 3.8 per day for secondary pupils.

4.3 More disadvantaged children, who had to share a computer, spent 2.3 hours per day on primary school work and 2.6 for secondary education.

## **5. Social and ethnic inequalities in home learning – research using *Understanding Society***

5.1 Children receiving free school meals, from single-parent households, with less-educated parents, and with Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage spend significantly less time on schoolwork at home than their peers during the COVID-19 school closure.

5.2 Children with Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds spend the least amount of time on home learning and are overrepresented in not receiving distance teaching.

## 6. School closures and children's mental health – research using *Understanding Society*

6.1 Mothers reported a substantial increase in children's behavioural and emotional difficulties during the pandemic. This increase was greater among children who hadn't been prioritised to return to school. Negative behaviours increased, driven by a rise in conduct problems and hyperactivity.

6.2 We do not have completely comparable evidence on the impact of school closures on learning loss, but the available evidence suggests that these effects are at least as large as the impacts on learning loss.

6.3 The return to school in September did not undo all of this damage. Wellbeing was higher in September 2020 than in July 2020, but still much lower than pre-pandemic levels.

6.4 The results suggest that the effects of school closures on children's wellbeing are large, and may take some time to mend. Going back to school in itself does not appear to be sufficient for children to 'bounce back'.

6.5 This suggests that additional support for children's mental health and wellbeing is likely to be required for some time, and justifies the focus that many schools have been placing on pupil wellbeing. Given the strong links between children's mental health and educational attainment, this may be an important strand of the educational 'catch-up' that is required.

### References

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March 2021