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**‘British Families in Lockdown’** is a qualitative study led by Leeds Trinity University which has investigated the day-to-day experiences of British families during the first seven weeks of lockdown. Fifty-six families from a diverse set of socio-economic backgrounds, geographies, religions and cultures participated in telephone or video calling semi-structured interviews and they shared their detailed, personal stories and experiences of employment, children’s schooling, health, well-being, family life, leisure time and technology use during the first phase of lockdown.

Outside of this study, reported Covid-19 evidence is overwhelmingly quantitative based, scientific, clinical, anecdotal or journalistic, as such, these qualitative insights will help build a more rounded picture of British family experiences. The study was quick to respond to the pandemic and is one of the few qualitative studies collecting data from the UK population during the initial stage of lockdown. Our initial findings demonstrate some of the complex ways in which Covid-19 has impacted equalities debates related to ethnicity, disabilities and gender. Our data supports quantitative reports to some extent but there is contrasting evidence and wider issues to also consider.

#### **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS**

- Parents of children with disabilities or with SEN (Special Educational Needs) found balancing their work responsibilities alongside childcare and home-schooling more difficult than parents of children without those additional needs.
- Employers who offered little or no support to employees with additional home needs, contributed to increased levels of anxiety for parents which led to fraught family relationships. For some this also had a negative effect on pre-existing mental health issues.
- Some parents found that their children’s mental health impairments significantly improved as a result of lockdown, in part because either the parents felt they were able to be more attentive, but also because for some children, school was the cause of their poor mental health.
- For some parents and children who were receiving mental health support prior to lockdown, these services often ceased at the start of lockdown causing concern for families.
- For some parents, the experience of lockdown provided an opportunity to reflect on work, family and childcare priorities for the future with the view of seeking a better balance.

#### **ON DISABILITIES**

In our study we did not expressly ask the participants about any disabilities they may or may not have. We did ask questions about general health and lifestyle, including questions about exercise, moving around and any difficulties experienced. We asked about changes to people’s daily routines and what aspects of life may have become more difficult or easier during lockdown. There were many opportunities for the participants to speak about any

physical and mental impairments as and when they felt it was important. Some of the parents that we interviewed at times discussed their impairments, and those of their spouses/partners and their children. In our initial findings, we have identified that the significant majority of families in our study were affected by physical and mental health concerns to differing degrees.

- During the first seven weeks of lockdown, parents whose children had either disabilities or SEN, commented on the lack of support or provision for their children whilst they were at home.
- Parents who were critical workers did not necessarily take up a school place for their child, as their children had pre-existing health conditions which placed them at a higher risk of infection. These parents felt that the children were safest at home with them.
- Parents of younger children, children with disabilities or with SEN found balancing work responsibilities alongside childcare and home-schooling more difficult than parents of children without additional needs.
- Parents of children with disabilities said that they were sometimes unable to manage their children's needs alongside their working obligations without additional support.
- In some cases, children with SEN were not given differentiated homework and the work they were expected to do by schools was perceived to be beyond their capacity without support.
- For those families who had additional support needs before lockdown, they often perceived that in lockdown they were expected to be able to manage without support.
- Some parents were guided towards online resources such as websites and blogs to help them care for their children with additional needs during lockdown.
- The difficulties some parents faced in managing their children's additional needs alongside the expectations of their employers, resulted in increased levels of anxiety and fraught family relationships at times. For some this had a negative effect on pre-existing mental health issues.
- Some parents who were receiving mental health support saw their support sessions end as a result of lockdown which was a concern for them.
- Some children's mental health support discontinued once lockdown began. This resulted in additional worries for the parents and the children concerned.
- Some parents found that their children's mental health impairments significantly improved as a result of lockdown, in part because either the parents felt they were able to be more attentive, but also because for some children, school was reported to be the cause of their poor mental health.
- As lockdown progressed, a small number of support services were conducting home visits whilst social distancing. In rare instances, some utilised video conferencing calling to contact families.
- Access to medication was a concern for parents at the very start of lockdown.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

There were clear inequalities present for parents and families who were living with physical or mental impairments within the home compared to those who were not. For these families

and particularly for those who were used to significant levels of support, the lack of continued support alongside increased and compounding pressures associated with work, childcare, coronavirus threat and additional needs made home life more difficult.

## **RECCOMENDATIONS**

- There should be more support offered to families living with additional needs during lockdown situations, this will help alleviate pressures and improve outcomes for these disadvantaged families.
- Work sent home from schools should be differentiated according to the needs of the child.
- Employers of home-workers whose households were negatively impacted by additional needs or disabilities, should be more supportive of the additional pressures faced by these parents during lockdown situations.

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