

Written evidence submitted by LSE Covid and Care Research Group

The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services
A Brief Review of Research by the LSE Covid and Care Research Group

Background

This research was conducted by the Covid and Care Research Group, hosted by the LSE Department of Anthropology and funded through a grant from the LSE. Our research group aims to leverage ethnographic methods in order to better understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the disadvantaged households across the UK. Understanding the multiple and intersecting forms of existing and new disadvantage that groups face is critical to the development of policy that is inclusive and meets the density and variety of people's needs. Our research group has conducted interviews since March 2020 with community leaders, community groups, and new associations of vulnerable people across different regions to gain insights into these issues in order to generate policy solutions and support local community initiatives.

Our approach to understanding the impact of the pandemic on education and children's services is grounded in an analysis of the changing networks of care that people are engaged in. The impact of the pandemic on children and those in education will vary widely across age, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, and different bodily and cognitive ability levels. Whilst some children may find themselves in largely self-sufficient households during the pandemic, others will be embedded in much larger networks of care with carers or parents outside the household, education and health support workers, and social care professionals. While every household has faced change and disruption during lockdown, those who regularly receive care and support from others in wider networks will have faced more profound disruption and harm during the pandemic. Attention needs to be given to the importance of both formal and informal care in supporting children of every age. By formal care, we refer to care from the state and other institutions; by informal, we refer to care received from friends and family and other informalised community support systems, typically unpaid.

Key findings

The UK government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has seen new social distancing guidelines and economic policies rolled out, including the closure of places of education and childcare settings and restricting movement between households. Many of these policies are modelled around middle-class conceptions of the archetypal nuclear family which is self-sufficient in its care labour, carrying assumptions of household autonomy and ableism. This has led to a series of unintentional consequences, including the exclusion, and at times stigmatisation, of single parent households, households without access to online resources, and those who rely on persons outside their household for childcare and/or education. Previously and now newly disadvantaged households have experienced difficulties in accessing vital necessities including the internet and IT resources, food and formal and informal networks of care. As a result, there have been significant impacts on mental health and wellbeing, education, nutrition, and violence in the home.

Households have had to absorb care for the elderly, children, the disabled and those with additional needs, with less support available from public institutions such as schools, community centres and social support services. This reduced access to formal care has placed a significant strain on households and in many cases results in poorer outcomes for children. At the same time, informal care

networks through friends and family are transformed and under strain, meaning children cannot receive care from grandparents or other relatives outside the household, or benefit from the fulfilment, learning and social development that time with peers provides. The decision to allow paid-for labour in the home such as nannies relieved the burden of childcare on the wealthiest before those who cannot afford paid-for childcare, drawing out the dilemma for some low-income families between caring for their children and returning to work. With economic re-opening taking priority over caring arrangements, many children remained cut off from their usual support networks. We identified an inequality between those able to pay for childcare upon re-opening, and those unable to pay or access unpaid support. The repercussions of lockdown for the most disadvantaged children are likely to be long-lasting, both in terms of educational attainment, and wellbeing and mental health.

Breakdown of evidence

EARLY YEARS CHILDREN

Infants' access to healthcare has diminished:

- Support for parents with infants has dropped, and parents are reluctant to visit their GP or local family centre and so are missing check-ups and vaccinations.
- Paediatricians have reported a decrease in the number of children being brought to A&E. Access to A&E is particularly critical in early years given young children's inability to communicate; it is common for under-5s to receive immediate examination for this reason.

Institutional care interventions are increasingly distressing:

- There has been an increase in the number of children taken into care.
- Children subject to care proceedings and taken into institutional care during this period would normally be able to have regular contact with their parents while their case was being considered, but this has not been allowed during lockdown. This denial of face-to-face visits, has been particularly traumatic for parents.
- A majority of parents in this demographic are economically disadvantaged and do not have access to digital platforms to interact with their children via technology, where this might otherwise have been arranged.
- This situation is acute for women who have recently given birth and had their children taken into care proceedings. Infants in these cases are missing out on vital bonding opportunities with parents, to whose care they may still be returned.

Virtual programmes have both strengths and limitations:

- Virtual early years programmes are beneficial for families whose schedules or other difficulties would prevent them from attending classes in person.
- Nonetheless, virtual classes and groups are generally not a substitute for the social, physical and cognitive stimulation that in-person settings allow, so the former are unlikely to facilitate early years development in the same way.

Pre-school development is suffering:

- Overall there has been little to no support for pre-schoolers during lockdown, impacting development.
- Early years settings have had reduced opportunity to advertise and make contact with parents whose children would benefit from day care.

- Parents find parenting in isolation stressful and difficult, with limited opportunity for learning from other parents and professional carers, which may lead to poorer developmental outcomes for young children.
- Some report noticing increased post-natal depression in mothers, which can diminish overall family wellbeing.
- Childminders who now have children returning to their setting after a long absence due to lockdown are observing noticeable and concerning changes to those children's development, including increased fearfulness, loss of attention span and focus, and anxious attachment to their parents.
- Children starting school in September 2020 have not had the time to develop the skills for school readiness that pre-school facilitates and have not had the usual visits to school which ease the transition.

PRIMARY- AND SECONDARY-AGED CHILDREN

Economically disadvantaged households rely on schools for access to food for their children:

- Schools have had difficulties sustaining their pupils' access to food and have been through a process of trial and error working out how to keep children fed in lockdown. Some invited families to collect food from school before deciding this contradicted 'stay at home' guidelines and left shielding families underserved.
- The move to food vouchers was widely welcomed since this empowers families to choose their own food for their children but using these vouchers for online orders needs to be clear and simple in order to serve shielding families not visiting supermarkets.
- In many cases, parents have reported that the vouchers are impossible to cash in, they face long wait times on welfare websites, or they have difficulty in securing slots for delivery of groceries from allocated stores.

Home-schooling in lockdown is exacerbating pre-existing inequalities:

- The digital inclusion gap has been widely publicised on news channels. Children in economically disadvantaged households have less access to technology and the internet, and schools worry that they will not be able to 'close the gap' between advantaged and disadvantaged students after lockdown.
- School staff describe the constant struggle to close the gap between premium and non-premium pupils, and lockdown will exacerbate this inequality. Some teachers report that the responsibility for this cannot fall to schools alone, but rather requires higher level action to improve equality of opportunity and outcome.
- Whilst the government encouraged Local Authorities to apply for laptops for pupils who need them, many families in need did not receive these.
- Supporting education at home has been more difficult for parents with poor literacy or IT skills, or parents who are learning English.
- Parents living in temporary housing or other overcrowded spaces, particularly women who have left abusive households, are finding it difficult to support their children in education.

Children's access to health and social care has diminished:

- Schools would previously provide other services to families ranging from referral to social workers, domestic violence services and additional needs support. Such provision has been stymied with the closure of schools.
- Some schools have tried to compensate for not seeing children in school by making phone calls or home visits, or asking to see the pupil when delivering food, to maintain welfare

monitoring. This however is a poor substitute for the contact time between staff and pupils that being in school offers.

- Whilst pupils around whom there were already welfare concerns or known vulnerabilities have been ‘checked in on’ by school welfare staff, pupils developing new mental health problems or experiencing new social or relational problems in the household during lockdown are likely to have their problems go unnoticed.

Virtual education has both strengths and limitations:

- Almost all parents would feel completely unequipped to home-school their child alone, so online input from schools offers a vital opportunity for continuing education in lockdown.
- Even in the event of engagement with remote learning, the quality of learning has deteriorated: teachers report a lower standard of pupils’ work than usual, and a lower standard to their marking and feedback (i.e. less constructive criticism) because they don’t want to make both pupils and their parents feel worse about how they’re coping with home-schooling at such a stressful time. This is particularly pronounced with primary-aged children.

OVERALL WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH

- Appointments and assessments with CAMHS have reduced and moved to over the phone.
- This is a problem for all children needing mental health support. It will particularly affect LGBTQ youth due to higher instances of poor mental health in this group, who are also missing out on their regular social and support groups.

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES (SEND)

The particular needs of those with SEND have often gone unaddressed whilst educational settings have been closed:

- The education of children and young people with SEND who have support workers in school is suffering where their parents/carer(s) struggle to fulfil this role.
- Many pupils with SEN and/or neurodiversity will find home-schooling particularly challenging and struggle to adapt. An example is that those on the autism spectrum will have more rigid categories of school being for lessons and home being for rest so may refuse lessons while at home. They are also more likely to find the return to school after a long period away harder, and we are likely to see an increase in anxiety around school and a refusal to return to school in this group.
- Since many with physical disabilities have more vulnerable immune systems, few pupils with Education, Health and Care Plans have accepted the offer to remain in school during lockdown. Schools are often aware of their pupils who would benefit from an EHC Plan but do not have one because obtaining one can be such a long process, as well as others who present as neurodiverse but do not have diagnoses. These latter groups are likely to be under-served in the current system.

CRITICAL WORKER POLICY

The critical worker childcare policy was not always understood and led to some tensions in communities:

- Some parents were unsure as to whether they qualify as a critical worker and thus whether they were entitled to childcare during lockdown. This was especially true early on, when education and daycare settings were closing and before the full list of critical workers was

released. This led to speculation and anxious uncertainty among the public, with many parents unsure as to whether they would be able to access childcare.

- Risk perception and fear around the virus led some parents to feel sending their children to school or pre-school was selfish and reckless, and some childminders remaining open for the children of key workers were accused of pursuing self-interest by staying open and increasing the community's risk.

Policy implications

Mental health

- The mental health implications of lockdown for many children and youth will not be short-term but long-lasting, especially for those with SEND. Families and schools need to prepare for this, and increased capacity for mental health support for children and young people is recommended.

Return to school/nursery

- Advice should be offered to parents on how the education/care setting will be different upon return, so they can try to prepare their child for those changes. Since this will vary between settings, this is best if coming from the setting itself, but the state can encourage this communication between settings and parent-carers.
- Education and care settings will need to respond to the damage that lockdown has caused for wellbeing and development. Increased pastoral support and approaches such as play-based learning are recommended to aid readjustment.

Digital Inclusion

- Free national broadband would eliminate internet access as a barrier to the economically disadvantaged engaging with their education.
- LAs should be encouraged to keep a permanent library of laptops available for loan to low-income households for educational purposes, and additional state funding should be allocated to LAs to make this possible. In the event of further lockdowns, these could easily be given out to families in need rather than LAs having to apply for the laptops, resulting in delays, slow roll out, and persisting uneven access to technology.

Access to food

- A well-prepared system of food vouchers that can easily be used both in person and online should be developed and maintained over time so that the system can be quickly rolled out to replace free school meals in the event of schools closing again.

“Vulnerable children” and those with SEND

- In a lockdown situation, policy makers should consider special accommodating guidelines for children and young people with SEND and their carers, and related public information campaigns, including:
 - Possibilities for social bubbles for special schools so they may remain open
 - Increased time outside permitted for neurodiverse children and their parent-carers for therapeutic benefit

- Nuance in educational measures for pupils with SEND that avoid either/or approaches to education, allowing responsiveness to individual needs
- Further encouragement should be given to schools to invite any children they are concerned about to remain in school, whether or not they are children of key workers or have a social worker, which would include those around whom there are wellbeing concerns or suspected undiagnosed SEND.
- For those who have been out of education or therapy for a long time due to lockdown, it will be more difficult to accommodate their needs. More support will be needed in terms of the time required to spend with each individual with SEND. There are likely to be significant mental health impacts for those with SEND and their carers/household members.
- Increased attention and support are required for pupils in Alternative Provision, who are disadvantaged at the best of times. This includes over-18s in AP who are often treated as adults despite requiring additional support.

Alleviating other pressures

- A ‘children’s hour’ for parks could be considered in lockdown situations to allow more time outside for parents and children, with reduced anxiety around mixing with a wider public, improving health and wellbeing for both children and their parent-carers.
- More public information should be circulated encouraging parents to continue to contact their GP over children’s health concerns and attend routine appointments for children’s check-ups and vaccinations.

Long term, approaches to improving educational outcomes need to be informed by an awareness of the impact of household income, housing quality, internet access, and additional needs on education. Without improvements in these factors for the most disadvantaged students, we are unlikely to see improvements in educational attainment, wellbeing and development or worse, a regression in these areas. These forms of disadvantage are harmful at the best of times, but also damage resilience and threaten regression in times of crisis.

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