



Childhood in the time of Covid

September 2020

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Foreword from the Children's Commissioner for England

Six months have passed since the Covid-19 pandemic took hold in this country and we entered an unprecedented lockdown. During this time, I have made it my Office's mission to highlight the risks to children caused by the pandemic and the measures to contain it, particularly the most vulnerable, and push for their interests to be a top priority.



Children have fewer health risks from Covid-19 and yet they have suffered disproportionately from the nation's efforts to contain the virus. This report aims to set out, in one place, the key ways in which children's lives have been impacted as a result of the Covid-19 crisis – the nation's biggest test since the Second World War. In doing so, it provides a roadmap for what must be done to enable children to recover from their experiences, and how their needs must be put first in the event of further lockdowns.

This is not simply a story of doom and gloom. For some children, certain aspects of the pandemic brought benefits. Families whose incomes remained stable, perhaps as a result of the furlough scheme, often found that they had more quality time to spend with one another. The percentage of children feeling stressed some of the time actually decreased from 47% to 34% between March and June.

Furthermore, I have been struck by the dedication and commitment of many teachers, social workers and other professionals up and down the country who, under extreme pressure, have been working with children during this time, in new and innovative ways, to protect them from the worst impacts of the crisis. There have been excellent examples of action taken to support children by national and local government, like the announcement of £1 billion of catch up funding at schools, providing children with laptops for online learning or councils doing everything they could to continue to keep services for families open - even if in some cases the support could have gone further. It has been encouraging to see a greater understanding developing within government of what it means to be a vulnerable child and the particular challenges they face.

But sadly, as this report highlights, in many decisions taken over the last 6 months, children haven't been at the forefront. While pubs, restaurants and non-essential shops opened, the majority of children were not able to attend school. This disruption has been damaging to children - especially vulnerable children who are likely to have had a vastly different experience of the pandemic than their more affluent peers. New evidence collected by my Office shows that 41% of children are more stressed about their schoolwork and exams since schools closed in March. Many children have felt lonely and isolated from their friends.

The damage goes far beyond lost education. Even before the crisis struck, there were 2.2 million children in England living in households affected by any of the so-called 'toxic trio' of family issues: domestic abuse, parental drug and/or alcohol dependency, and severe parental mental health issues, including nearly 800,000 children living with domestic abuse and 1.6 million living with parents with severe mental health conditions. These numbers are likely to have swelled, fuelled by families locked down in close quarters for weeks and months, and an emerging economic crisis adding pressures on family finances. Evidence collected by my Office suggests that across England, as many as 550

homeless families with children could have spent the whole of lockdown in a B&B, which often means sharing a single room, with kitchen and bathroom facilities shared with other households. Parents in situations such as these have been doing their best to home school their children, but the support available to them has been diminished.

As a new school term starts, it is time to start afresh and consider how children can - and must - be prioritised from this point onwards. The Government's statement that schools will be last to close and first to reopen in the event of further lockdowns is essential and highly welcome, but is not in itself enough for children to recover from the experiences of the past six months. I want to see a comprehensive recovery package for children to help mitigate the damage done by the crisis thus far. Central to this package must be significant investment in early help for families starting from the early years. The nation's efforts to build back better must begin with a focus on children.

And should there be more lockdowns, children's needs must come first. In addition to school closures being a last resort, the full range of services which protect children must be prioritised in this way, including children's centres and visits from social workers.

The true measure of a society is in how it treats its most vulnerable members. During a time of continued national emergency, now is the time for us to step up and put our children first.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Anne Longfield". The signature is written in a cursive style. Below the signature is a short horizontal line.

Anne Longfield OBE
Children's Commissioner for England

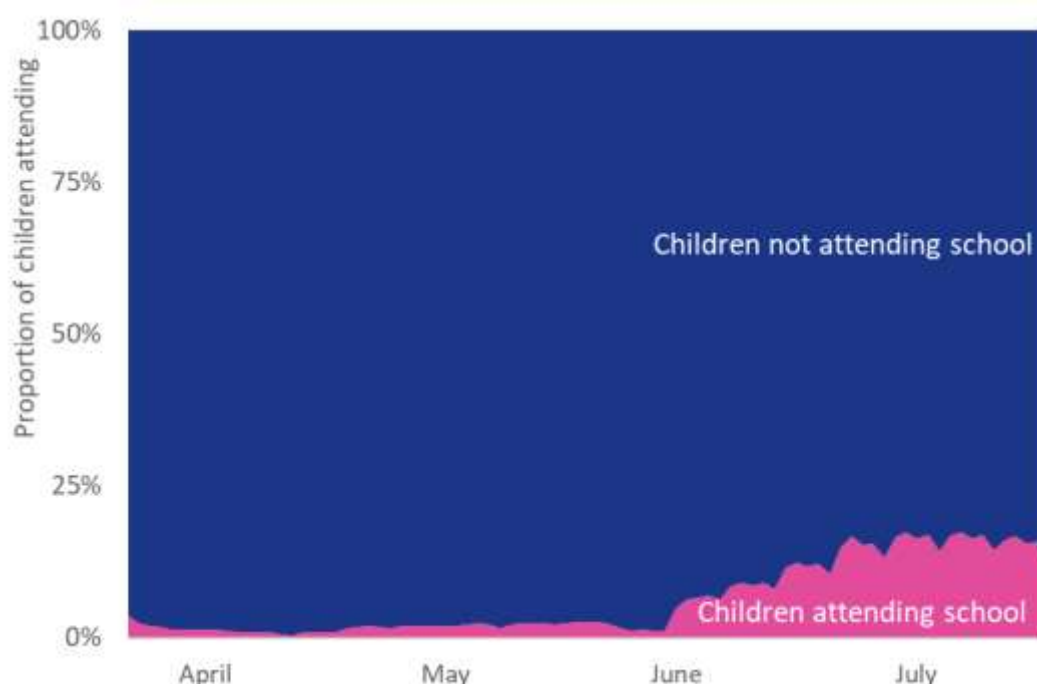
Education

The single biggest change for the majority of children during this crisis has been not attending school. Plans were made for certain children to continue attending, including vulnerable children (some children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities - see box below - and children with social workers) and the children of keyworkers. But uptake among these groups was low, with an average of just 8% attending before schools partially opened in June.¹ The majority of children had no right to attend school for most, if not all, of lockdown. As a result, approximately 575 million school days have been missed since March.²

"In the dark, it's like, none of us know what's happening ... not knowing when it's going to end"

– 17-year-old apprentice

Percentage of children attending school during lockdown³



Before the crisis, disadvantaged children were 18 months behind their wealthier peers in their learning by the time they finished their GCSEs, with no improvements made since 2017.⁴ The full impact of school closures on children's outcomes is not yet known, but the closures are likely to have worsened the disadvantage gap. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds had less contact with their teachers and less work marked than wealthier children. In the first month of lockdown, private school children were twice as likely to take part in daily online lessons as those in state school.⁵ Moreover, 60% of private schools and 37% of state schools in the most affluent areas had an online platform to receive work, compared to 23% in the most deprived state schools.⁶ While some schools went above and

¹ The average proportion of children with an EHCP or social worker attending between the start of lockdown and the end of May (excluding holidays and half term) using [DfE, Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#)

² Based on an average of 7.4% attendance by pupils across 70 non-holiday school days between the start of lockdown and the end of the school year (calculated from [DfE, Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#)) multiplied by a total of 8.9m pupils in England (from [DfE, Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics, 2020](#))

³ Proportion of Children Attending from [DfE, Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#)

⁴ https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/EPI_2020_Annual_Report.pdf

⁵ <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief/>

⁶ 60% of private schools and 37% of schools in the most affluent areas had an online platform to receive work, compared to 23% in the most deprived schools

beyond to offer good quality remote education to their pupils and stay in touch with vulnerable children at home, many did not have a digital offer, and it tended to be poorer pupils who lost out. Teachers estimate that their pupils are on average three months behind, and over half report that the learning gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has widened since the previous year.⁷

In other cases, schools may have been offering effective remote learning but poorer children did not have the right home environment to make use of it. Nearly 40% of children in low income families were living in homes without enough desk space during lockdown.⁸ Hundreds of homeless children lived through lockdown in a B&B, which in some cases could have meant a whole family sharing a single room, with little space for children to work in and lots of noise (see **Housing**).⁹ Later on in the crisis, homeless children were classed as vulnerable and allowed to attend school, but only after missing out on weeks of education.

The digital divide has also presented real barriers to some children accessing education. Ofcom estimate that between 1.14m and 1.78m children in total in the UK have no home access to a laptop, desktop or table.¹⁰ Many children in these families rely on smartphones to access the internet, but completing and submitting schoolwork on a smartphone is extremely challenging. Furthermore, an estimated 60,000 11-18 year olds in the UK have no home internet access at all.¹¹ In a welcome move, the Government announced its laptop scheme in April, with 200,000 devices and 50,000 routers made available for children with social workers, care leavers and disadvantaged year 10s. But with 540,000 children in those eligible groups, only a maximum of 4 in 10 of these children (37%) could receive one of these devices. Data secured by the Children's Commissioner's Office shows that a third of Multi-

Academy Trusts (MATs) received fewer than 10 laptops for all of their year 10 pupils, while 27 MATs received just a single device.¹² Furthermore, disadvantaged children in year groups other than year 10 lost out completely. The Government has extended the scheme this academic year, with a further 150,000 devices being made available for schools which have to close (or children who are sent home), but this may well prove to be insufficient to cope with demand. The original scheme provided enough laptops for 7 in 10 disadvantaged Year 10s. To provide laptops to 7 in 10 disadvantaged children in all other year groups it would have needed an additional 940,000 laptops, which is over six times more than the additional devices promised so far.

Q: What makes you stressed?

A: "A-levels are so important and I can't do work as well at home. One laptop between three"

– 17-year-old girl in response to CCO Covid stress survey

The suspension of exams led to disarray this summer, causing young people across the country considerable anxiety and anger. On A-level results day, it emerged that two in five centre assessed grades (i.e. the grades that schools judged a pupil would have achieved in a given subject) had been moderated down by the algorithm developed by Ofqual. Analysis by Ofqual showed that poorer pupils were more likely to have their centre assessed grades lowered during the moderation

⁷https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/4119/schools_responses_to_covid_19_the_challenges_facing_schools_and_pupils_in_september_2020.pdf

⁸<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/08/22/how-lockdown-has-affected-childrens-lives-at-home/>

⁹<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/cco-no-way-out.pdf>

¹⁰https://www.ofcom.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0030/198138/tech-tracker-internet-and-device-access-children-data-tables.pdf

¹¹<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringthedigitaldivide/2019-03-04>

¹²<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/08/18/children-without-internet-access-during-lockdown/>

process.¹³ Alongside the other UK Children’s Commissioners, the Children’s Commissioner for England called on universities to honour their offers made to prospective domestic students regardless of their grades.¹⁴ Shortly afterwards, the Government announced a U-turn in which all A-Level students would receive whichever was highest out of their centre assessed grades or those calculated by Ofsted. While this was a welcome move, it was too late for many A-Level students who had already missed out on their university place. Recognising the algorithm used by Ofqual to be irredeemably flawed, the Children’s Commissioner called for GCSE students to receive their centre assessed grades.¹⁵ Shortly afterwards, the Government announced that GCSE students would receive whichever was highest out of their centre assessed grades and the grades calculated by Ofqual.

Cancelling exams had a particularly profound impact on external candidates, including children in elective home education, who were unable to receive centre assessed grades. The Government’s response has been that these children will be able to take their exams in the autumn, but this could leave GCSE and A-Level pupils unable to take up places at college or university in the meantime.

Those in vocational learning have also been hit by the crisis. In lockdown an estimated one in five of all apprentices were on a break in learning, having been made redundant or having left their programme. Existing data suggests that young apprentices under 19 years old were more likely to have had their apprenticeship disrupted.¹⁶

Following the Children’s Commissioner’s calls that schools should be last to close and first to re-open if cases of the virus increase,¹⁷ the Government has been clear that it expects all children to be back in school full-time from now on, subject to local lockdowns. A £1 billion package to fund catch-up support for children (including tuition) has been put in place, but it remains to be seen whether these funds will be directed towards the disadvantaged and vulnerable children most in need of support.

Children, especially vulnerable children such as those with SEND, may struggle to reintegrate into the classroom after such a long period away, with anxiety levels high and new routines to become familiar with. 41% of children in our recent survey¹⁸ said that they are more stressed about their schoolwork or exams since lockdown began, and 19% of children said ‘schoolwork I had to do whilst I was at home’ was their top cause of stress in general. This anxiety may manifest in a variety of ways in the coming weeks and months, including school refusal or as challenging behaviour, which may leave children at risk of exclusion. Our survey also revealed a clear gender divide in children’s experience of school closures, with girls reporting a significantly higher degree of stress related to exams, home-learning and missed education than boys. The Children’s Commissioner wrote to the Education Secretary urging the Department to collect live data on exclusions, absence and withdrawals from the roll in the autumn term.

¹³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/909368/6656-1_Awarding_GCSE_AS_A_level_advanced_extension_awards_and_extended_project_qualifications_in_summer_2020_-_interim_report.pdf (page 136)

¹⁴ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/08/16/childrens-commissioners-joint-call-to-universities/>

¹⁵ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/08/17/statement-from-anne-longfield-on-2020-gcse-results/>

¹⁶ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/cco-what-covid-19-means-for-young-apprentices.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/08/05/children-and-schools-must-come-before-pubs-and-shops-in-planning-for-future-covid-19-lockdowns/>

¹⁸ See accompanying technical report on survey of children’s stress <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/stress-among-children-in-england-during-the-coronavirus-lockdown/>

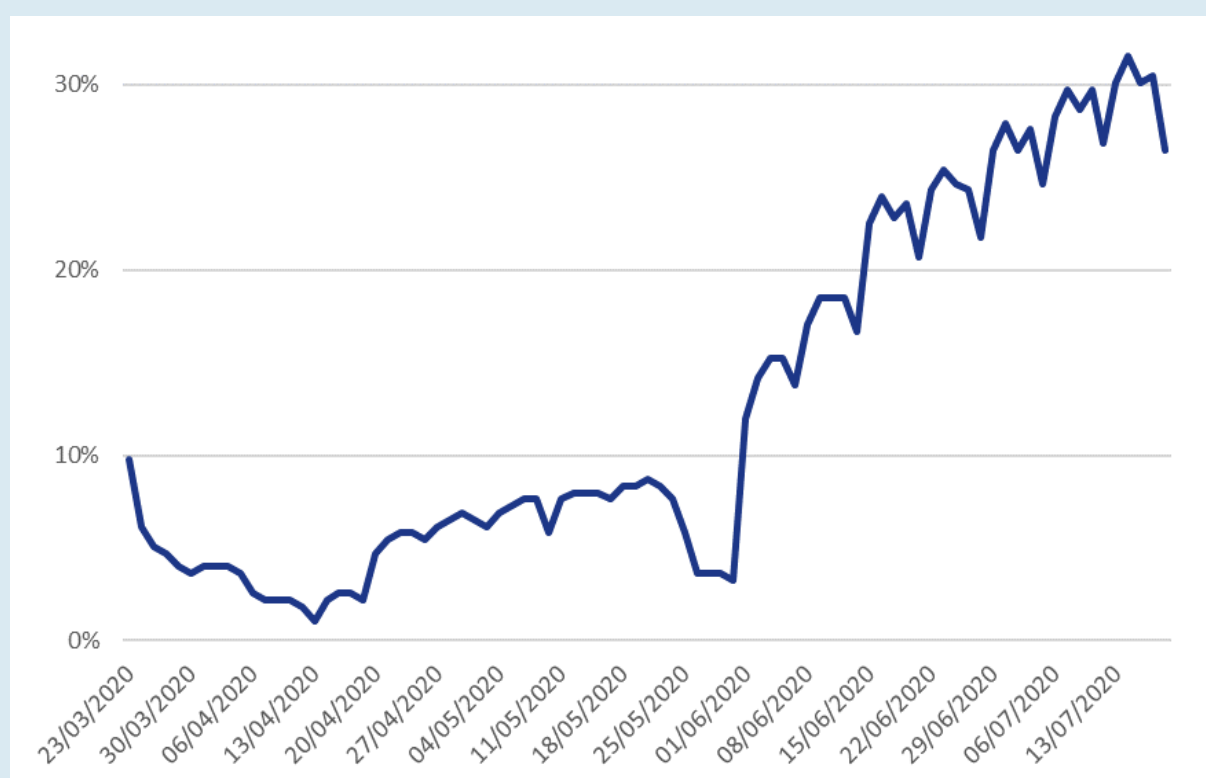
Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Children with Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) have experienced particular challenges during the pandemic.

Children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs)

When the crisis began, the Government stated that children on Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), who have high levels of need, should be classified as “vulnerable” and allowed to attend school during lockdown if that would be safer. But the attendance figures show that only 6% of children with EHCPs attended school on average from the start of lockdown until the end of May.¹⁹ This rose to 28% on average in July, which means that 72% of children with EHCPs were still not in school.

Percentage of children with an EHCP attending school during lockdown²⁰



Risk assessments were sometimes a barrier to these children with EHCPs attending school. Schools were asked to conduct risk assessments, jointly with parents, to determine whether it was safer for a child with an EHCP to be at school or at home. But in a survey of parents of children with SEND, 75% said that a risk assessment did not take place, or they did not know if one had happened.²¹ Some parents describe the risk assessment being used to dissuade them from sending the child to school, when in reality they felt this was where their child’s needs would be best met.²² For example, one parent was told that the risk assessment indicated that it would be safer for the child to be at home

¹⁹ The average proportion of children with an EHCP attending between the start of lockdown and the end of May (excluding holidays and half term) using [DfE, Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#)

²⁰ [DfE, Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus \(COVID-19\) outbreak](#)

²¹ <https://www.specialneedsjungle.com/coronavirus-send-education-survey/>

²² <https://www.specialneedsjungle.com/coronavirus-send-education-survey/>

because at school they would need to be reminded to wash their hands.²³

Another key barrier was the downgrading of rights for children with EHCPs. A child's EHCP provision is what enables them to learn and be safe in the classroom. Usually a child has an absolute entitlement to the special educational support (e.g. one-to-one support from a Teaching Assistant) and health services (e.g. Speech and Language Therapy) set out in their EHCP. But in May, the Coronavirus Act set out that councils and local health bodies were only required to make "reasonable endeavours" to deliver these services. As a result, some children received much less support than they would have received otherwise - for example, only 12% of parents reported that their child received some form of speech and language therapy, occupational therapy or physiotherapy. A third of parents felt that their decision to send their child back to school was affected by these changes.²⁴ The Children's Commissioner opposed the downgrading of these rights, and would have preferred a stronger requirement for councils and local health bodies to take "all practicable steps" to deliver the services in a child's EHCP.²⁵ The change was only reversed and children once again entitled to all the provision set out in their EHCP in August.

Q: What makes you stressed?

A: *"I have ADHD and dyspraxia and have felt a lot more stressed and upset feeling isolated"*

– 16-year-old boy in response to CCO Covid stress survey

Q: What makes you stressed?

A: *"Worried about my family catching it, especially my little brother who is disabled. The government don't care about children like him"*

- 13-year-old boy responding to CCO Covid stress survey

Many families struggled to meet the needs of children with EHCPs at home. Very few parents had the specialist skills needed to effectively teach their children, meaning that progress previously made was lost. Looking after children around the clock has led to many parents and siblings becoming stressed and burnt out, with 70-80% of parents saying that their own mental health has declined and 54% saying their physical health has declined.²⁶ This was compounded by a reduction of social care support: 76% of families who had previously been receiving support from social services before lockdown (such as respite care and summer play schemes) saw it all stop during the crisis.²⁷ One parliamentary committee heard how these families felt they had been "utterly abandoned".²⁸

²³ <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/627/pdf>

²⁴ <https://www.specialneedsjungle.com/coronavirus-send-education-survey/>

²⁵ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/05/12/response-to-steps-taken-to-relieve-councils-of-certain-duties-to-children-with-special-educational-needs-and-disabilities-send/>

²⁶ <https://disabledchildrenspartnership.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/LeftInLockdown-Parent-carers%E2%80%99-experiences-of-lockdown-June-2020.pdf>

²⁷ <https://disabledchildrenspartnership.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/LeftInLockdown-Parent-carers%E2%80%99-experiences-of-lockdown-June-2020.pdf>

²⁸ <https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/627/pdf/>

Other children with SEND

The pandemic has also had a significant impact on children with SEND who do not have EHCPs.

Families in the process of applying for an EHCP have been affected by a further set of legal changes which suspended the usual statutory timescales which need to be met for the assessing and issuing of EHCPs, if the cause of any delay is related to coronavirus. As a result of the changes, councils are only required to act “as soon as reasonably practicable”. These changes came into effect on 1 May and only lapsed on 25 September. Children who were in the process of obtaining EHCPs when the pandemic began still may not have that support in place when they return to school.

Furthermore, there are children with lower levels of need who do not have an EHCP and are instead on “SEN Support”. This should usually lead to them receiving extra help in the classroom, albeit without the stronger entitlements associated with an EHCP. Unlike children with EHCPs, children on SEN Support were not classified as vulnerable and were not allowed to attend school during lockdown (unless they also had a social worker). Parents sometimes struggled to teach these children at home: fewer than one in four parents of children with SEND said that the schoolwork sent home had been tailored to their children’s needs.²⁹

Children with SEND (both those with EHCPs and children on SEN Support) may struggle disproportionately with the return to school, especially if they have not attended since March. This could potentially lead to a spike in disciplinary interventions, exclusions and persistent absence among these groups. Before the crisis, children with SEND had higher rates of exclusion and persistent absence than other children.³⁰ There are concerns that these rates could spike during the autumn term, along with the rate of children being withdrawn from school rolls. This could be as a result of parent choice, but it might be as a result of pressure from the school - a practice known as “off-rolling”.³¹ Sometimes children are indirectly off-rolled when the school fails to provide them with the support they need and parents feel forced to withdraw the child.

²⁹ <https://www.specialneedsjungle.com/coronavirus-send-education-survey/>

³⁰ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england>

³¹ For a discussion of off-rolling and its possible links to SEND, see the CCO’s report into elective home education: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/skipping-school-invisible-children/>

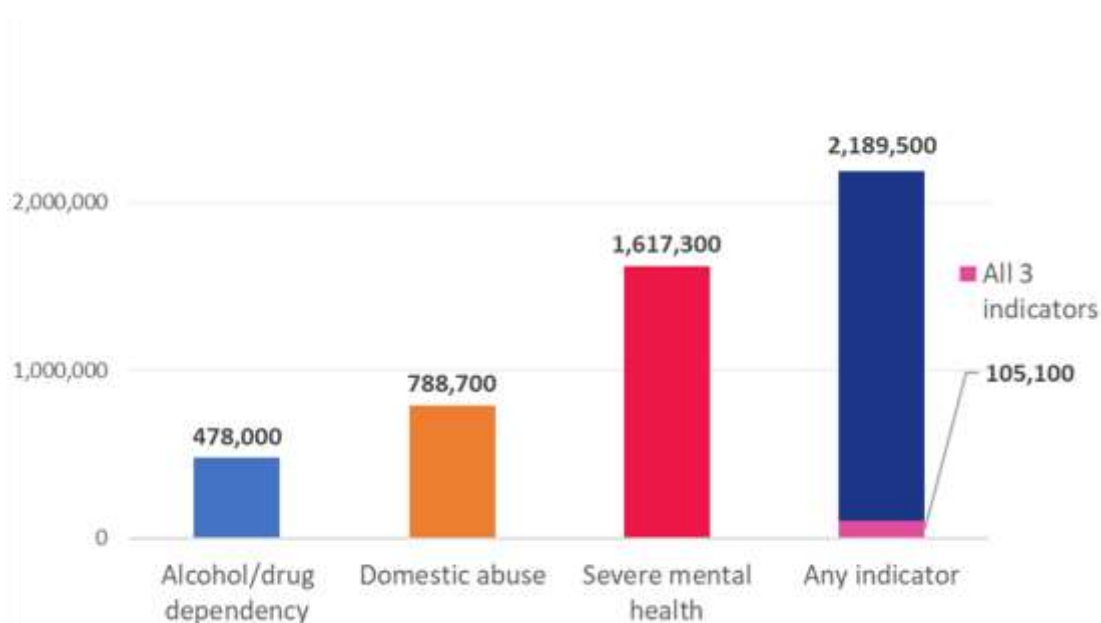
Social care

School closures have not only affected children’s education, they have also left children more vulnerable and at risk of harm.

The CCO’s local area profiles of child vulnerability made clear the number of children who faced significant risks as the crisis unfolded.³² Even before the crisis struck, there were nearly 2.2 million children in England living in households affected by any of the so-called ‘toxic trio’ of family issues: domestic abuse, parental drug and/or alcohol dependency, and severe parental mental health issues. This equates to six children in the average classroom growing up at risk due to their family circumstances.

The 2.2 million consisted of nearly 800,000 children living with domestic abuse; 478,000 children whose parents had drug or alcohol dependency, and 1.6 million children who had a parent with severe mental health conditions. Just over 100,000 children in England lived in a household where all three issues were present.³³

Estimated number of children aged 0-17 in England living in households with any indicators of the so-called ‘toxic trio’, 2019/20³⁴



Many of these children were not identified by the state and not receiving help. For example, only a fifth of children in families where domestic abuse is perpetrated have a social worker.³⁵

Under lockdown, these children and many others became even more invisible to services. The number of children referred to children’s social care services for support fell by almost a fifth between April and June.³⁶ Schools, frequently the first to notice when something is wrong, may often have only had eyes on the very small number of children attending. Other services such as youth clubs, health visitors and children’s centres were either stripped back or taken online so that many of the children who

³²<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/04/25/childrens-commissioner-for-england-creates-local-area-profiles-of-child-vulnerability-during-covid-19/>

³³ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/chldrnr/>

³⁴ Vulnerability estimates from [CCO, Childhood vulnerability in England 2019](#), updated for 2019/20 as part of [CHLDRN](#).

³⁵ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/cco-briefing-children-domestic-abuse-coronavirus.pdf>

³⁶ <https://www.local.gov.uk/childrens-social-care-referrals-fell-fifth-during-lockdown>

most needed these services were not being seen by professionals face to face.

Meanwhile, children's lives at home became more difficult. An increase in extreme financial strain, combined with family members all being stuck at home in close proximity has naturally made family life more challenging (see **Family Life**). These stresses on families have been exacerbated by the shrinking of support services for children and parents alike. Along with universal services like school and health, specialist services like mental health support were also scaled back. Some children struggled to access mental health support (see **Health**) and the story was the same for their parents. All this means that even though children's services referrals have fallen, the need for these services has increased. Calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline went up 80% in June,³⁷ while the number of people seeking help from Alcohol Change UK for problem drinking soared nearly 400% from 4,089 between 23rd March and 30th April last year to 20,067 in the same period this year.³⁸

The disruption caused by Covid-19 has been particularly worrying for teenagers ahead of critical exams and on the cusp of adulthood. The Children's Commissioner highlighted that 120,000 teenagers – one in 25 of all teens – were already falling through gaps in education and social care provision before Covid-19.³⁹ These are young people who have experienced setbacks like persistent absence from school, exclusions, alternative provision, dropping out of the school system in Year 11, or going missing from care. Without serious investment in re-engaging these teens, they face a potentially tumultuous future of educational failure, unemployment and criminal exploitation.

“Social services could see I was independent. They dumped me here and just left”

– 18-year-old care leaver living in independent accommodation

This last risk is amplified by gang activity during the lockdown, many of which used this time for a 'recruitment drive', taking advantage of young people's increased vulnerability, boredom, and time spent online.⁴⁰ Those known to children's social care are prime targets⁴¹; in some areas gangs are even pressuring children into care so that they can be more easily exploited.⁴² Research shows that rather than reducing county lines activity, Covid-19 has led to criminal gangs adapting their methods of working – e.g. by recruiting local young people to carry drugs, instead of recruiting young people in cities and getting them to travel long distances.⁴³

All these pressures have increased demand on children's services. Extra government funding has been welcome in providing some relief to local authorities, but only 8% of the first £3.2 billion of additional Covid-19 emergency grant funding⁴⁴ provided directly to local authorities has gone towards children's services.⁴⁵ It is estimated that between March and July, children's services incurred additional expenses of £136 million.⁴⁶ But this figure is likely to increase imminently as teachers begin making safeguarding referrals once again. Some local authorities are predicting surges in demand of up to 250%⁴⁷, representing both the backlog of unmet needs since March and the rise in need more generally. Furthermore, even before the start of the pandemic, councils were already facing a £3.1

³⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53498675>

³⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/03/problem-drinking-soars-under-uk-lockdown-say-addiction-experts>

³⁹ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/teenagers-falling-through-the-gaps/>

⁴⁰ <https://nva.org.uk/2020/06/hidden-in-plain-sight/>

⁴¹ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/CCO-Gangs.pdf>

⁴² <https://www.liverpooecho.co.uk/news/liverpool-news/fears-gangs-pressuring-children-care-18807185>

⁴³ <https://www.crestadvisory.com/post/county-lines-after-covid-a-new-threat>

⁴⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-emergency-funding-for-local-government>

⁴⁵ https://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS_Building_a_country_that_works_for_all_children_post_Covid-19.pdf

⁴⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-authority-covid-19-financial-impact-monitoring-information>

⁴⁷ <https://www.willispalmer.com/kent-director-warns-referral-spike-could-be-up-by-250-when-children-return-to-school/>

billion funding gap by 2024/25 based on pre-Covid-19 levels of demand and activity.⁴⁸ Without enough money for this initial peak and then longer recession, children's services will be overwhelmed.

The pandemic has also affected children who live away from their parents - the 75,000 children in care. Lockdown restrictions meant that these children were cut off from seeing families and trusted professionals in-person for months on end. Care leavers and children living in unregulated accommodation were at risk of loneliness and isolation, as well as not having the right support if they became ill or had to self-isolate.

The passing of regulation amendments on 24th April made significant temporary changes to the legal protections for children in care⁴⁹. Under these amendments, the timescales for social workers to visit children in care were relaxed, along with timescales for care review meetings, independent visits to children's homes and Ofsted inspections (among other amendments). At a time of heightened anxiety, some of the most vulnerable children in the country could not be confident of seeing their social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) at regular intervals as they had previously.

The majority of the amendments remained in place until 25th September⁵⁰. Some will remain in place until March 2021, including allowing Ofsted to have longer timescales for visiting children's homes, and for visits to be carried out virtually in case of public health need. The Children's Commissioner's Office has raised concerns about this extension of the regulations, and asked for clearer guidance and improved monitoring to ensure that virtual visits only happen when no other option is available due to COVID-19 restrictions. The Children's Commissioner's view remains that children's rights should be strengthened, not undermined, during this crisis.

"I've been bored quite a lot cos we're not allowed to go out anywhere or to go and see my sisters and family. We're just waiting to be honest"

– 13-year-old boy living in children's home during lockdown

The response to the pandemic thus far has shown that real time data is key to battling Covid-19. Concerned that some councils did not have the data needed to identify and support vulnerable children in their area, the CCO developed a series of local area profiles of child vulnerability⁵¹ which has been used by local authorities and government officials.

⁴⁸https://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS_Building_a_country_that_works_for_all_children_post_Covid-19.pdf

⁴⁹ Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020

⁵⁰ Article 39 have appealed the outcome of the Judicial Review, which determined that the regulations could remain in place

⁵¹ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/chldrn/>

Help at Hand

Help at Hand is the Children's Commissioner's advice and representation service for children living away from home or otherwise working with children's services, and for care leavers aged 18-25.

Following the start of national lockdown on 23rd March, two distinct themes emerged through the Help at Hand advice line: the distress caused to children in care by the sudden loss of contact with family (see **social care**); and the isolation experienced by young care leavers.

Contact

Help at Hand received a high number of calls concerning children accommodated under voluntary care orders due to their disability, but who were used to frequent family visits and overnight stays at home. Many residential special schools (RSSs) made the decision to cease all face-to-face visits on 23rd March, and gave limited, if any, information on their plans to reinstate regular contact. While some RSSs allowed for socially distanced visits, for example in the garden or through a window, many children were denied even this. Video calls are of limited benefit for very young children or those with severe cognitive processing difficulties, and many parents and professionals have raised concerns about the long-term effects of months of reduced, or non-existent contact with family and loved ones.

The Children's Commissioner wrote to the Department for Education, Ofsted, the ADCS and the Independent Children's Homes Association to highlight her concerns about contact arrangements after the high number of calls to our advice service from parents and advocates of distressed children.

Case study

A parent called Help at Hand concerned about their child, X, who has cerebral palsy and lives in a specialist children's home under a voluntary care order.

Before Covid-19, X was having overnight contact with his family every other weekend and for half of school holidays. During lockdown X was allowed Skype contact with his family, but it was difficult for him to engage meaningfully.

X's parents asked if he could be allowed to stay at home for the remainder of lockdown but this was not allowed.

The distress caused by the sudden change in routine was reflected in X's behaviour and willingness to engage in other activities at the children's home.

Support for care leavers

The transition from care to independent adulthood is tough under almost any circumstances. Covid-19 presented a fresh set of challenges for care leavers, with a reduction in the usual support network of care leaver groups and face-to-face catch ups with personal advisors. While most 18-20-year-olds returned from student or rented accommodation to live with families, many care leavers faced lockdown in total isolation. A survey conducted by NYAS found that 86% of care leavers felt more lonely and anxious during lockdown. 43% of care leavers also reported less contact with their personal advisor during lockdown.⁵²

Help at Hand heard from care leavers who were concerned about loneliness and the effect of isolation on their mental health; who were worried about contracting Covid-19 and not receiving any help if seriously ill; and from those who were unable to pay bills or source adequate food supplies during lockdown.

The Children's Commissioner wrote to the Government about protecting care leaver rights and was pleased that statutory duties towards them were not diluted in the social care regulation amendments. Nonetheless, many care leavers told us that they felt forgotten, unsupported and fearful about money during this time.

Case study

Y, a 23-year-old care leaver contacted Help at Hand. Y lost her zero-hours contract job at the start of lockdown and had applied for universal credit.

She was living on her own and scared that the UC payment would not kick in soon enough to allow her to buy food. Her Personal Advisor had not been answering her calls or texts with requests for help.

⁵² <https://www.nyas.net/wp-content/uploads/NYAS-Coronavirus-Survey-Report-Young-Lives-in-Lockdown-May-2020.pdf>

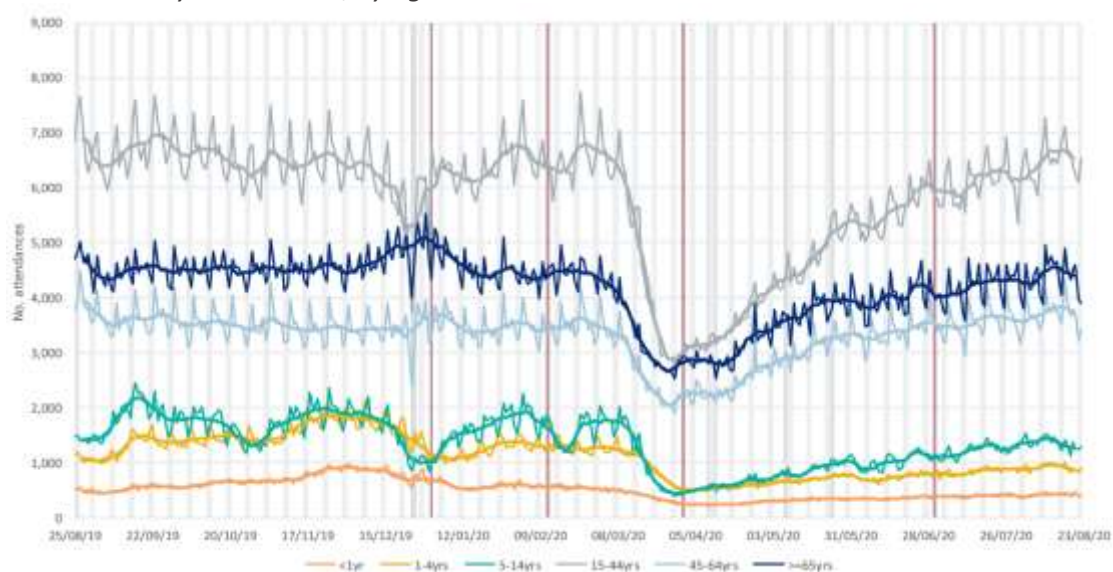
Health

While children are less at risk of becoming seriously ill due to Covid-19, the secondary impacts of the pandemic have nonetheless affected children's health. In response to our survey, over a quarter of children told us that they had felt more stressed about their mental or physical health since the start of lockdown.

There has been less capacity in the system to treat children for conditions other than Covid-19. A Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) survey found in the first week of May that 6% of paediatric inpatient capacity was lost to adult services. 22% of hospital paediatric doctors had been transferred to adult wards and 46% of community trainees had been redeployed.⁵³ In April, up to 10% of paediatric ward staff were ill or shielding.⁵⁴

There have also been fewer children presenting to healthcare services. The RCPCH found decreases in hospital attendance in their survey of hospitals, including up to a 93% decrease in A&E attendance, while Public Health England found that there was a drop in A&E visits by children specifically.⁵⁵ Since lockdown has ended, A&E attendance has recovered for adults and older people while visits for children have remained lower (see graph below). This drop included an expected reduction in sports injuries, but attendances for common illnesses dropped significantly too. For GP consultations there were similar falls: The Health Foundation found that children aged 5-15 had 21% fewer appointments during lockdown, and 38% fewer appointments in May 2020 compared to May 2019.⁵⁶

Recorded A&E daily attendances, by age⁵⁷



⁵³ <https://www.bmj.com/content/370/bmj.m3249>

⁵⁴ <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/impact-covid-19-child-health-services-tool-results>

⁵⁵ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/879585/EDSSSBulletin2020wk15.pdf

⁵⁶ <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/charts-and-infographics/how-has-covid-19-affected-service-delivery-in-gp-practices>

⁵⁷ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/912391/EDSSSBulletin2020wk34.pdf

GP consultations per person by age (as % of 2019 average)



Overall, 2 in 5 (40.6%) 16-18 year olds who were in need of a health service reported having experienced disruption to health services.⁵⁸

Lockdown is also likely to have impacted on wider public health. A survey of 14-19 year olds in July found that 40% were snacking more.⁵⁹ Combined with the loss of PE lessons and cancelled sports clubs, it is likely that children’s physical fitness has significantly deteriorated during this period.

Furthermore, there are indications that children were missing vaccinations at least in the first few weeks of lockdown⁶⁰ and Brook (the sexual health and education charity for young people) reported a marked drop in attendance from young people aged 13-25. While attendance was returning to pre-Covid-19 levels by August, advisers reported concerns about untreated STIs, late terminations and unintended pregnancies.⁶¹

Lockdown has particularly impacted on some children’s mental health and wellbeing. The withdrawal of structure and support in many children’s lives, the closure of schools, reduced physical activity and wider family stress as well as the loneliness caused by the inability to see friends is expected to have had a severe impact on some children’s mental health.⁶² Although some research

Q: What makes you stressed?

A: *“Hospital appointments being cancelled, being too ill to do online classes”*

- 17-year-old girl responding to CCO Covid stress survey

⁵⁸ Need of a health service defined as either having one or more long term condition(s), and/or currently taking any prescribed medication. Disruptions experienced by young people aged 16-24 during first months of the COVID-19 lockdown, You-COPE study (https://www.ucl.ac.uk/child-health/sites/child-health/files/ppp-youcope-briefing-disruptions_2020-06-23.pdf?fbclid=IwAR0j229WS_eK-Z8lqm4zPFgrwzE0Y70Gp637Meylxk-IDROBDQPgdvvhvKE)

⁵⁹ <https://biteback2030.com/real-story/hungry-change-giving-children-food-system-works-them>

⁶⁰ <https://www.eurosurveillance.org/content/10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2020.25.19.2000848>

⁶¹ <https://nya.org.uk/2020/08/inside-out-nya-brook/>

⁶² <https://reachwell.org/2020/07/09/covid-19-lockdown-a-child-and-adolescent-mental-health-crisis/>

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(20\)30186-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(20)30186-3/fulltext)

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(19\)31013-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(19)31013-X/fulltext)

indicates a drop in anxiety for some children⁶³, lockdown loneliness seems to have been a particular problem for young people⁶⁴ and there are early indications of a rise in mental health problems.⁶⁵ In particular, the prevalence of children's depressive symptoms has increased substantially, relative to before lockdown.⁶⁶ A survey of 2,279 parents found that emotional difficulties were consistently elevated among children from low income backgrounds during lockdown compared to those from higher income households.⁶⁷

For children with mental health problems, lockdown has often made things worse. One study suggested that 8 in 10 young people with a history of mental health problems felt the pandemic had made their mental health worse, and for 4 in 10 it was much worse.⁶⁸ A recent study indicated a small rise in child suicides, finding that restriction to education and other activities, disruption to support networks, tensions at home and isolation appeared to be contributing factors.⁶⁹

Q: What makes you stressed?

A: *"Losing my physical output on football as that was somewhere I could just focus on football and not think about anything else going on in my life and just let everything go and now obviously I can't do that it's been hard"*

- 16-year-old boy in response to CCO stress survey

For children already receiving mental health services, face-to-face appointments were in the majority replaced with online sessions or even cancelled as some services were unable to offer online sessions.⁷⁰ Services also reported major decreases in referrals, many of which would usually come from schools or GPs: data from NHS England shows that new referrals almost halved between February and April 2020 from 72,773 to 37,303 respectively.⁷¹

For children in mental health hospital wards, the disruption was severe. According to NHS England, 18% of beds were closed in April 2020, of which approximately 7% cited Covid-19 staffing issues. Certain services, including those for children under 13 and deaf children, were closed altogether – all of these were in London. A survey by the CCO shows that although the majority of children's mental health wards remained open, family visits were suspended in nearly three-quarters of them.⁷² When visits restarted, many took place under restrictions including the use of PPE and social distancing.

While ward staffing levels seem to have held up well, many children lost face-to-face contact with external professionals such as therapists or advocates. Together with the cancellation of external visits and activities, this amounted to a severe restriction of children's liberty. Some units also introduced isolation for new admissions or, once home leave recommenced, once children returned from leave. There were significant delays in discharging patients, with lockdown exacerbating problems with the availability of children's social care or community mental health teams.⁷²

The impact of lockdown on children's underlying mental and physical wellbeing and the disruption to health services is likely to have consequences for children's health in the coming months and years.⁷³

⁶³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-53884401>

⁶⁴ <https://reachwell.org/2020/07/22/dr-maria-loades-lockdown-loneliness-in-children-and-young-people-may-continue-to-impact-on-mental-health-for-years-to-come/>

⁶⁵ <https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2020-06-16-children-show-increase-mental-health-difficulties-over-covid-19-lockdown>

⁶⁶ <https://osf.io/v7f3q/>

⁶⁷ <https://cospaceoxford.org/findings/changes-in-children-mental-health-symptoms-september-2020/>

⁶⁸ <https://youngminds.org.uk/about-us/reports/coronavirus-impact-on-young-people-with-mental-health-needs/>

⁶⁹ Note due to the small numbers involved the study's authors point out that it is difficult to draw definite conclusions from the study. <https://www.ncmd.info/2020/07/09/suicide-covid/>

⁷⁰ <https://www.hsj.co.uk/coronavirus/major-drop-off-in-referrals-to-childrens-mental-health-services/7027373.article>

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Figures to be published in forthcoming report from the Children's Commissioner's Office

⁷³ Written evidence submitted by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health to the Health Select Committee

Early years

In England 1,688 babies are born every day⁷⁴, meaning over 270,000 children have been born since the pandemic began in mid-March. In some areas, birth registrations were cancelled during lockdown which created practical problems for some families, e.g. being unable to apply for a passport for the baby. Furthermore, many new families will have faced significant reductions in support. Public health guidance has meant reduced contact with family, friends and informal support networks, as well as changes to formal support services (see **Social care** and **Health**). The guidance for health visitors was for new birth visits to take place over the phone, and visits to older babies and toddlers to stop, unless families had been identified as vulnerable. Even now, guidance says that, for older babies and children, health visitor visits should be prioritised for those families with additional needs⁷⁵. For those counted as low risk, midwifery booking in appointments also largely moved to being provided virtually. Many Children's Centres stopped offering in-person support, and attendance at childcare and early years settings was far lower than usual⁷⁶. Regulation changes allowed for social work visits to take place virtually⁷⁷, but initial guidance did not make provision for how this would apply to babies. Babies, toddlers or children with certain communication needs cannot engage virtually, and there should have been clear guidance on prioritising visits for these children

Face-to-face contact can be a vital time to pick up on additional needs and provide help, or to make a referral to other services. Many young children are living in circumstances which may make them vulnerable – estimates by CCO show that 379,000 under-fives live with parents suffering from severe mental ill health, and 145,000 are living with parents suffering drug or alcohol problems. We also estimate that 235,000 under-fives live in houses where domestic violence has taken place in the last year, clearly placing them at risk of harm, yet less than a quarter of these children are known to children's services⁷⁸. These difficulties are likely to have been exacerbated by the crisis, with signs that domestic abuse and poor mental health have increased, at the same time as opportunities for identifying these children were significantly reduced (see **Social care**).

⁷⁴ ONS, Live Births in England September 2018 to August 2019, Provisional

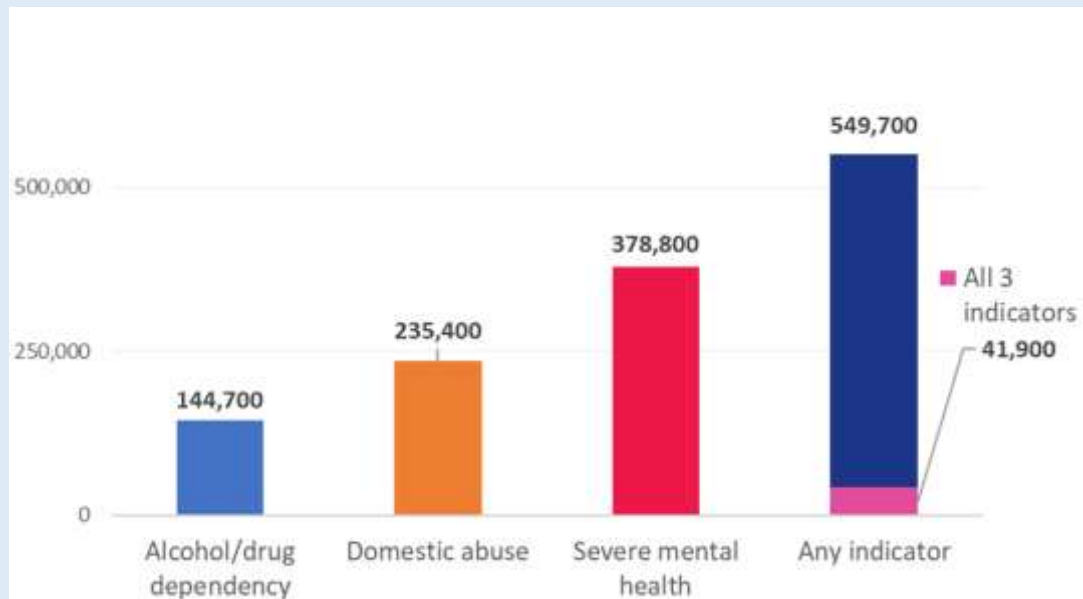
⁷⁵ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/coronavirus/wp-content/uploads/sites/52/2020/03/C0552-Restoration-of-Community-Health-Services-Guidance-CYP-with-note-31-July.pdf>

⁷⁶ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak/2020-week-28>

⁷⁷ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2020/445/contents/made>

⁷⁸ Children's Commissioner Local Vulnerability Profiles 2020

Estimated number of children aged 0-4 in England living in households with any indicators of the so-called 'toxic trio', 2019/20⁷⁹



Young children are also more likely than older children to be in poverty, with one in three under-fives living in poverty⁸⁰. The current financial situation could make living conditions worse for these children. Young children from poor backgrounds already have lower educational outcomes than their peers by the age of five⁸¹, yet no funding has been made available to help children in nurseries and early years settings catch up on all the early education they have missed⁸². This will not only affect these children's life chances, but also the financial viability of early years settings, which are already struggling. There is currently a threat of widespread closures in the sector: 24% do not expect to be operating in a year's time, rising to 34% in the most deprived areas.⁸³

⁷⁹ Vulnerability estimates from [CCO, Childhood vulnerability in England 2019](#), updated for 2019/20 as part of [CHLDNRN](#).

⁸⁰ <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/new-poverty-stats--one-in-three-preschool-children-are-living-in>

⁸¹ https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/EPI_2020_Annual_Report_.pdf

⁸² Catch up funding has been made available for children in Reception classes, but not other early education settings such as nurseries.

Youth justice

In spite of the lower risk to children from the virus itself, some key decisions taken to manage Covid-19 in adult prisons have been replicated in youth custody institutions, including strict adherence to social distancing guidelines and the decision to halt all face-to-face education. As a result, the management of Covid-19 in the children's secure estate has placed much greater emphasis on infection control than many other considerations, including the overall wellbeing of children.

Key differences in the approaches taken in the two estates are welcome – for example additional provision of in-cell activity for children and a greater focus on promoting 'connection'⁸⁴ to support those whose mental health suffered as a result of restrictions. However, these actions do not go far enough to mitigate the negative impact the restrictions have on children, who are at greater risk of secondary risks such as mental health difficulties. This is particularly stark for children in the secure estate, where high levels of complex need are common.

"I know it's completely relevant because it's a lockdown and we need to keep people safe but at the same time it's a bit like... I don't know... I feel like a bit of a dog in a cage to be fair"

– 17-year-old boy in Youth Offending Institute (YOI)

The Children's Commissioner has collected weekly data submissions from the Youth Custody Service (YCS) in order to monitor the experiences of children in custody during the lockdown period. This evidence shows that the smallest youth justice establishments – Secure Children's Homes (SCHs) – have maintained a close to full timetable for children from the start of the pandemic in March, with full access to in-person education. But it also shows that between March and May, many children in YOIs and STCs were:⁸⁵

1. Spending between 20-23 hours per day locked in their cells, with limited interactions with staff and other children.
2. Having severely limited access to time in the fresh air. In some prisons this was as low as 30 minutes per day.
3. Missing out on in-person education. Only 2 of the 7 STCs and YOIs kept delivering face to face education to children.
4. Eating most meals locked in their cells.

During this period children were provided with additional phone credit to keep in touch with family and some establishments made changes to give children access to in-cell activities and opportunities to interact with staff while in their cells. The introduction of video visits, however, was slow: these were not available to most children until the end of May.

Since June, restrictions have been slowly relaxing, with some level of face-to-face education now being delivered in all of the 7 prisons. For example, children in Werrington YOI are now attending a three-hour education session every day, where they had previously only accessed in-cell workbooks. Children in Oakhill STC's access to taught education has increased to 10 hours per week since July and is due to increase to 20 hours per week by the end of September. There is also increased access to out of cell activity, including arrangements to eat out of their cells in small 'family groups' of 3 or 4 for some meals, and some in person visits from family are now available in all prisons. In spite of these welcome relaxations, children are still spending too long in their cells. This prolonged isolation

⁸⁴ Both between staff and children, and between children and their families with the provision of additional phone credits.

⁸⁵ Parc YOI was an exception. For a breakdown of the timetables in different establishments throughout this period please see the 'Children in Custody' briefing: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/cco-children-in-custody.pdf>

may have serious implications for children’s long-term wellbeing and may undermine rehabilitative efforts and plans for reintegration into the community.

Levels of bullying and violence are reported to have fallen during lockdown. This is most likely due to the increased time children spend in their cells, and to the smaller groups that children are associating in, which can allow for enhanced relationships between children and staff and are likely to make children feel safer.

In addition, the Government introduced two statutory instruments which downgraded the legal rights of children in youth custody. The changes allow for restrictions to be placed on visits from family or professionals, and on access to meaningful education and other activities in YOIs, during any ‘transmission period’ until 25th March 2022. Similar changes have been put in place for STCs. The minimum expectation for time out of cell in STCs has changed from 14 hours to 1.5 hours per day. These legal changes to children’s rights and entitlements were introduced on 15th May and 2nd July 2020 respectively, although restrictions had been in place since 24th March 2020.

At the same time as these children’s rights were watered down, their ability to challenge decisions was also reduced, with the advocacy provider removing staff from establishments. While advocates were working remotely, there was an 87% decrease in the number of advocacy referrals across all settings.⁸⁶

“...when you’ve got nothing to do so you’ve got a lot more time to think and then you can start thinking about bad things and that’s how it escalates. And if you’ve got nothing to do you’re just watching telly and sleeping all day it just ruins you”

– 17-year-old boy in Youth Offending Institute (YOI)

On 25 March 2020, the Commissioner wrote to the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice to raise concerns about the downgrading of rights, and the treatment of children in custody more broadly.⁸⁷

Covid-19 has also exacerbated existing issues around long delays for criminal trials to be heard, increasing the risk of remanded children being stuck in prison without a sentence, and the risk that children who turn 18 while awaiting trial will be tried as adults instead of as children.

⁸⁶ Comparing the number of referrals made in April and May 2020 to the same months in 2019. This data will be published in full in a forthcoming report from the Children’s Commissioner’s Office.

⁸⁷ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/03/25/calling-on-the-lord-chancellor-and-secretary-of-state-for-justice-to-ensure-the-rights-of-children-in-custody-are-upheld-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak/>

Housing

While the Government took decisive action to take all rough sleepers off the street during lockdown, there was no similar national plan to ensure that homeless children and their families were housed in suitable accommodation.

According to Government statistics, there were almost 130,000 children in England living in temporary accommodation in the first quarter of 2020.⁸⁸ Children living in this kind of accommodation faced an additional layer of hardship during lockdown. With schools, libraries and other public spaces shut, there was little respite from the overcrowded conditions of temporary accommodation, which might mean a single room shared by the entire family. The lack of clarity on rules allowing children to play outside, particularly in the first few weeks of lockdown, also meant that many families were too anxious to use outdoor spaces for play and exercise (see **Family Life**).

Children in B&Bs faced particular challenges during the crisis, as kitchens and bathroom facilities in B&Bs are often shared. This meant families were unable to self-isolate if they had symptoms and were unable to control contamination from other residents who were not following social distancing rules. Our Help at Hand team heard from one family of 6 who were terrified that their Travelodge accommodation was also being used to house NHS workers who were staying there to avoid infecting

“I was 100% trapped in the hotel. There was no way out”

– 16-year-old boy who lived in a Travelodge with his mother and 5 siblings for the duration of lockdown

their own families. A survey of 15 local authorities by CCO found that at the start of lockdown, 714 families were living in B&Bs in these areas. On the basis of this data, it is estimated that nationally there were between 1,100 and 2,000 families with children housed in B&Bs in England. By the end of lockdown there were 476 families living in B&Bs in the same 15 local authorities surveyed. Nationally, we therefore estimate that as many as 1,350 families were living in B&Bs at the end of lockdown. Our estimates also suggest that between 400 and 760 of these families were living in B&Bs for longer than the 6-

week legal limit, and that across England somewhere between 290 to 550 families with children spent the whole of lockdown (23 March to 31 May) living in a B&B.⁸⁹ The Children’s Commissioner wrote to the Permanent Secretaries at MHCLG and DfE on the 24th March, following full national lockdown, to highlight this issue.⁹⁰

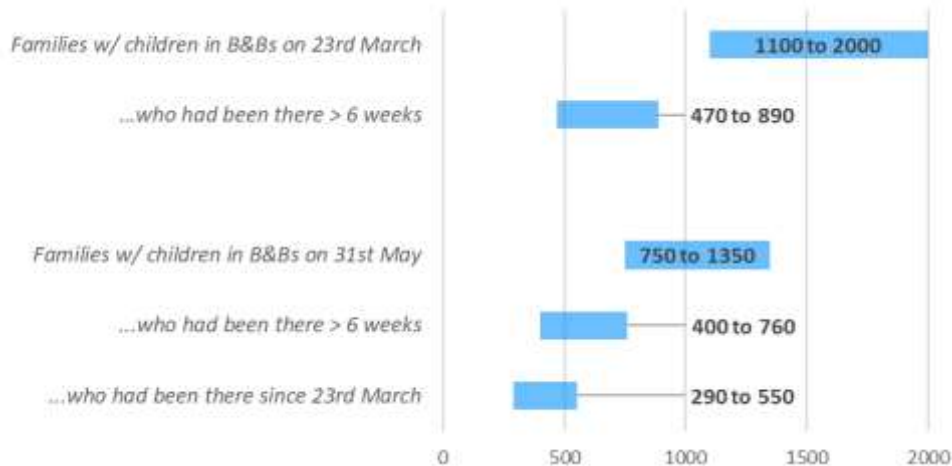
Estimated number of homeless families with children housed in B&Bs during lockdown⁹¹

⁸⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness>

⁸⁹ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/cco-no-way-out.pdf>

⁹⁰ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/03/24/anne-longfields-letters-to-the-secretary-of-states-for-hlhc-the-dfe-and-dwp-regarding-the-impact-of-the-coronavirus-outbreak-on-children-and-families/>

⁹¹ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/no-way-out/>



Some other families are likely to have spent lockdown in tiny single rooms converted from former office blocks and warehouses. Rooms in these conversions can be as small as 13m² – only slightly larger than a standard car parking space and far outstripped by the Government’s “minimum space standards” of 39m² for a one-bed flat. These fast developments were enabled by 2013 extensions to Permitted Development Rights (PDRs), which allow developers to bypass local authority planning permission, and which prevent councils from rejecting a development on the basis of quality or size of accommodation. Following her 2019 report on family homelessness, the Children’s Commissioner asked government to reverse the policy with immediate effect.⁹² Nevertheless, on 21st July 2020 MHCLG announced a further extension to PDRs. The Government’s own report on PDRs – published on the same day as this announcement – concluded that the scheme will lead to worse quality homes with respect to the health, wellbeing and quality of life of residents.⁹³

In addition to making life more difficult for families who were already homeless, the Covid-19 crisis is also likely to have increased the number of families at risk of becoming homeless in the near future. Before the crisis, the CCO estimated that there were some 375,000 children living in households that had fallen behind on their rent or mortgage payments, and therefore at financial risk of becoming homeless.⁹⁴ The CCO has more recently estimated this number to be 420,000 during May this year⁹⁵ and is likely to rise further yet, with the Bank of England warning of higher unemployment rates in the months ahead (see **Family Life**). In a welcome move, the Government extended its ban on eviction by 4 weeks. This lapsed on 20th September and it is not yet clear what measures are being put in place to prevent families becoming homeless.

⁹² <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/bleak-houses/>

⁹³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/902220/Research_report_quality_PDR_homes.pdf

⁹⁴ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/bleak-houses/>

⁹⁵ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/cco-no-way-out.pdf>

Family life

“For someone like me being ‘locked in’ with my mum is probably my worst nightmare. [...] Being a young carer has always been stressful but add in a global pandemic and you have a recipe for stress highway. The simple acts of respite I took for granted. In lockdown instead of focusing on remote learning for my yr12 exams I was focusing on filling out DWP paperwork for my mum who lost her job due to coronavirus.” - Girl, 17, a young carer

What makes you stressed? *“Being stuck in one place with everyone at home arguing all the time” - Boy, 15*

What makes you stressed? *“My father not being able to go work in Covid-19” - Girl, 13*

People were told to stay at home during lockdown.⁹⁶ These rules were enforced by the police and (largely) followed voluntarily, but some families and authorities were not clear on the rules around children’s right to play outdoors as part of “one hour’s exercise”. We heard of parents being stopped by the police from kicking a football around with their children.⁹⁷ Access to public green space for children to play in was limited, especially in poorer urban areas,⁹⁸ and some parks were closed to all visitors during the height of lockdown. 8% of children in England did not have access to a private garden, rising to 22% for children from Black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds⁹⁹. These families would have been particularly affected by the reduced access to public parks.

Summer schemes provided a valuable opportunity for some children to go out, socialise and catch up on missed school time. These schemes had still not been given permission to go ahead in late June¹⁰⁰, even though other reopening plans were in progress. Once they were allowed, they were required to operate bubbles, which in combination with late notice meant many summer schemes did not go ahead.

With families stuck inside and parents attempting to juggle childcare, home-schooling and work, children’s lives increasingly shifted online. While the online world has offered many benefits to children during this time, including enabling children to complete schoolwork (see **Education**), chat with friends and have fun, there are still risks associated with children going online. Early signs indicate that online child abuse increased during this period. Between January and June 2020, the US National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) received 12.1 million reports of suspected child sexual exploitation, an increase of 90% from the 6.3 million reports during the same time period a year earlier.¹⁰¹ The Internet Watch Foundation and its partners blocked at least 8.8 million attempts by UK internet users to access videos and images of child sexual abuse during lockdown.¹⁰²

As of the end of May, 31% of children lived in homes where parents reported better parent-child relationships and another 64% reported relationships staying about the same. There were, however, over 500,000 children (roughly 4%) who lived in homes where parent-child relationships had worsened. Children in low-income households were 70% more likely to be in a family where the parent reported a deterioration in parent-child relationships.¹⁰³ Children’s experiences of lockdown also appear to have been coloured by their parents’ occupation and ability to spend time at home:

⁹⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-address-to-the-nation-on-coronavirus-23-march-2020>

⁹⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/apr/10/coronavirus-park-closures-hit-bame-and-poor-londoners-most>

⁹⁸ E.g. <https://love.lambeth.gov.uk/lambeth-council-statement-brockwell-park-temporary-closure/>

⁹⁹ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/08/22/how-lockdown-has-affected-childrens-lives-at-home/>

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/06/23/we-are-running-out-of-time-to-set-up-vital-summer-schemes-for-children/>

¹⁰¹ <https://www.missingkids.org/blog/2020/covid-19-and-missing-and-exploited-children>

¹⁰² <https://www.iwf.org.uk/news/millions-of-attempts-to-access-child-sexual-abuse-online-during-lockdown>

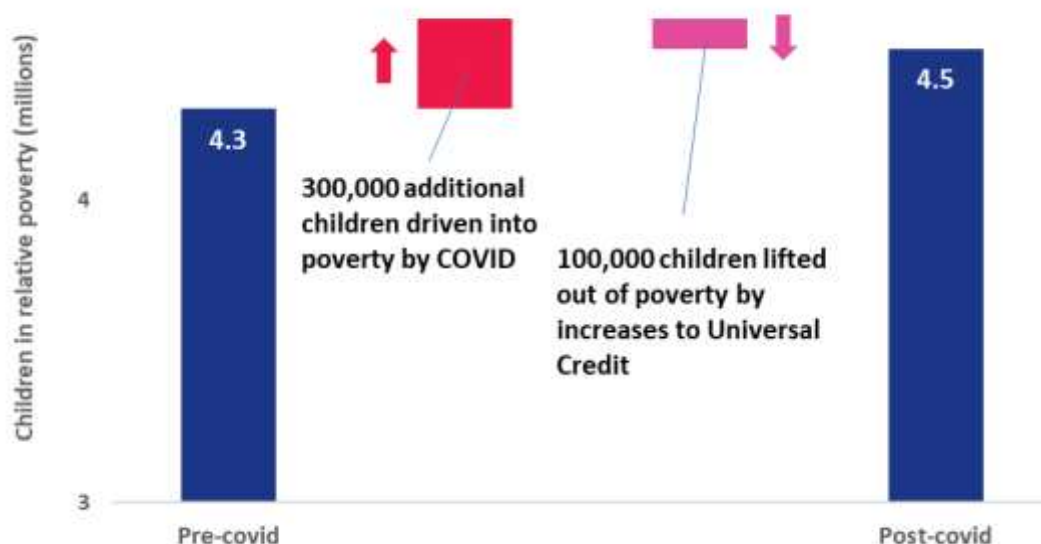
¹⁰³ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/08/22/how-lockdown-has-affected-childrens-lives-at-home/>

our survey found that 68% of children whose parents were working away from home had felt stressed during lockdown, compared to 44% of children whose parents were furloughed.

The economic impacts of coronavirus have also affected the welfare of children and families. It has been estimated that median household income has fallen by 4.5%¹⁰⁴ between May 2019 and May 2020, the largest yearly fall since the 1970s. Early estimates suggest that 300,000 children have been pushed into poverty by the disruptive effects of lockdown on unemployment.¹⁰⁵ These figures are likely to underestimate the full economic impact of coronavirus on children and families, since unemployment is forecast to reach 12% at the end of the year as the recession unfolds.¹⁰⁶

Expanded welfare spending has partially mitigated the economic impact on children so far. Increases to Universal Credit¹⁰⁷ (including a £20/week overall uplift and a reversal of cuts to the Local Housing Allowance) lifted an estimated 100,000 children out of poverty.¹⁰⁸ Many more children saw incomes protected by the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (the CJRS or furlough scheme), with 1.2 million children living in families where an adult was furloughed in April.¹⁰⁹ Even so, nearly two thirds of families on UC have been forced to borrow money to stay afloat, and half are behind on rent and other essential bills.¹¹⁰ Moreover, the additional financial security provided by these schemes is time-limited – the CJRS scheme is scheduled to end completely in October, with concerns raised about how effective the subsequent Jobs Support Scheme will be, and the Universal Credit uplifts are only in place until March 2021.

Estimated impact of COVID-19 on number of children living in relative child poverty in UK¹¹¹



¹⁰⁴ <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/the-living-standards-audit-2020/> (note: estimates exclude pensioner households)

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/06/04/children-should-not-bear-the-burden-of-the-pandemic-recession/>

¹⁰⁶ <https://obr.uk/fsr/fiscal-sustainability-report-july-2020/>

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/this-time-is-different-universal-credits-first-recession/>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/estimating-poverty-impacts-of-coronavirus>

¹⁰⁹ CCO based on Understanding Society, forthcoming

¹¹⁰ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/press/nearly-two-thirds-families-universal-credit-forced-lockdown-debt-%E2%80%98nightmare%E2%80%99>

¹¹¹ <https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/estimating-poverty-impacts-of-coronavirus>

Reduced family incomes and restrictions on movement increased food insecurity for children. The Trussell Trust reported an 89% increase in need for emergency food parcels in April 2020 compared to the same month last year.¹¹² At the end of April, 350,000 children were living in a household where someone had been forced to skip a meal in the last week and 249,000 were in families that had accessed foodbanks.¹¹³ The Free School Meal scheme, an important programme for providing food directly to children, was replaced with a voucher that could be spent by parents at supermarkets while schools were closed. By the end of April – one month after schools had closed – only 47% of children who would usually be receiving FSM were provided either meals or vouchers.¹¹⁴ The voucher scheme was originally designed to cover only the meals that children would have missed, meaning it was not planned to cover children during the summer holidays. This position was subsequently reversed after a public campaign (including a key intervention from Marcus Rashford and a letter from the Children’s Commissioner to the Chancellor¹¹⁵) and the scheme was continued until the start of the new school year.¹¹⁶

¹¹² <https://www.trusselltrust.org/2020/06/03/food-banks-busiest-month/>

¹¹³ CCO based on Understanding Society, forthcoming

¹¹⁴ CCO based on Understanding Society, forthcoming

¹¹⁵ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/06/08/our-letter-to-the-chancellor-regarding-free-school-meals-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

¹¹⁶ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/06/16/anne-longfield-responds-to-extension-of-free-school-meals-over-summer-holidays/>

Conclusion and recommendations

As this report has shown, the impact of Covid-19 on children and their families has been widespread, profound and ongoing.

The scientific evidence is clear that young children are less likely than adults to contract Covid-19 and play a smaller role in spreading the virus, and that it is very rare for children to become seriously ill after contracting Covid-19.¹¹⁷

And yet children have faced a cocktail of secondary risks which means that many have suffered disproportionately as a result of the crisis. At best, children's needs have been frequently side-lined and ignored, most notably by the decision to open restaurants, non-essential shops and pubs before schools were fully re-opened. At worst, vulnerable children (including children in care, children in custody and children with SEND) have seen their rights actively downgraded - at a time when protections should have been increased, not weakened.

The result is a rising tide of childhood vulnerability. Even before the crisis, there were 2.2 million children in England living in households affected by any of the so-called 'toxic trio' of family issues: domestic abuse, parental drug and/or alcohol dependency, and severe parental mental health issues. After months of national anxiety, the stripping back of key support services and an emerging economic recession, the impact of lockdown on children is only just starting to become clear. Children can be both resilient and adaptable, but they can't do this on their own, and the crisis has shown how few resources some children – and their families – can rely upon when things go wrong.

Some children enjoyed aspects of lockdown. For example, families whose incomes remained stable, perhaps as a result of the furlough scheme, often found that they had more quality time to spend with one another, and some children became less stressed as a result of a break from the regular rhythms of everyday life. But for vulnerable and disadvantaged children, the story has been very different.

In short, Covid-19 has exposed and then amplified existing inequalities facing children, meaning those children already facing the worst life chances have felt the greatest burden from the virus and our response to it.

The challenge, therefore, is twofold; firstly to adapt our response to Covid-19 – lessening the burden placed on our most vulnerable children in the event of further lockdowns. But secondly, and more fundamentally, to address the underlying issues which made these children and their families so susceptible to adversity in the first place – to build back better. All families want to be able to support their children when things go wrong, and it is the job of the state to make sure all families can. This needs to be the Government's central ambition if it serious about 'levelling-up' opportunity for children and families across the country.

Covid has made this more vital than ever, and having exposed the fault lines in our society, it has increased the imperative to act. This is not a situation that is going to go away: we are facing the spectre of a winter of Covid-related restrictions across society, followed by a long economic tail including widespread unemployment of the type not seen since the 1980s. Unchecked, this alone is a time-bomb with the potential to impact families to an even greater degree than the virus. Unless we act now, Covid-19 will become an inter-generational crisis, with the impact of the economic fall-out on parents determining the future prospects of their children. This would decimate the Government's ability to level-up opportunity across the country in the way the Prime Minister has repeatedly promised to do.

¹¹⁷ <https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/covid-19-research-evidence-summaries>

At the same time, the response to Covid-19 has shown us how, as a society, we can respond to huge challenges. Let's recognise how communities have pulled together, and frontline services across the NHS and social care (including children's social care) have stepped-up; the schools that have become a lifeline for struggling families. We can harness that spirit, with a bold and ambitious action plan, focused on ensuring that all children can access a basic level of support at home and in school.

Children haven't had their nightingale moment during this crisis. This is the scale of the response that now is needed:

1. A **comprehensive recovery package for children** to mitigate the damage caused by the crisis thus far.

The Government needs to ensure that all families have the basic resources to provide care for their children. It needs to introduce a pre-emptive package of welfare and housing support for families who have built up rent arrears, to counter a wave of family homelessness. The £20 uplift in Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit for families, due to expire in April 2021, should be retained, and an additional £10 per week child payment introduced.

Families who are struggling need to be enabled to access help and support within their communities, before they reach crisis point. This must mean greater investment in local authority early help services, the Troubled Families programme and health visitors. All of these services should be brought together in local Family Hubs, which should become core assets in every community.

There needs to be recognition of the long-term disadvantage the crisis has caused to children's education. Schools should target their portion of the £1 billion catch up fund on vulnerable and disadvantaged children who have lost out the most – they should not be forced to spend it on PPE or adaptations to school buildings. And there must be a significant focus on pastoral care in the coming weeks and months, supported by accelerated implementation of the Government's Green Paper on mental health, so that every child can access counselling in school.

2. Children to be put at **the heart of planning for further lockdowns**, local or national.

The Government has echoed calls from the Children's Commissioner that schools should be the last to close and the first to re-open in further lockdowns. The full range of services used by children must also be prioritised in this way, with children's centres and family hubs able to remain open and visits from social workers and health visitors continued as far as possible.

Key to keeping services open is regular and rapid Covid-19 testing and tracing for children and those working with them, including for those who do not have symptoms (but may have been in contact with the virus or with someone who has it). This will enable a more targeted approach to containing the virus. There must also be adequate PPE for teachers and other professionals.

Children's rights and protections should be upheld. Legal changes which have reduced children's rights and are still currently in operation should be reversed.

In addition to these overarching calls, the Children's Commissioner is making specific recommendations in each of the areas covered by this briefing. These can be found in appendix 1.

Appendix 1: specific recommendations in each area

Education

In the event of further lockdowns:

1. Schools should be last places to close and first to re-open.
2. In the event of class or school closures, all children who are well and who struggle to learn at home, whatever the reason, should be entitled to attend school. The Department for Education's REACT teams should focus on driving up attendance among this group.
3. The Department for Education should expand its laptop scheme beyond the 150,000 additional devices ordered, so that all children have the equipment they need to learn from home in the event of school closures. Every school should have a comprehensive remote education offer for children who have to stay at home.

Towards long term recovery:

4. Reducing educational disparities between disadvantaged children and their wealthier peers must be central to the Government's levelling up agenda.
5. Pupils and school staff should have access to quick, local testing to minimize time out of school and avoid entire year groups being sent home or entire schools closing unnecessarily.
6. Going forward, schools should focus on children's mental health and wellbeing, rather than simply focusing on attainment. The Government should be clear that a spike in exclusions, persistent absence and withdrawals from the roll must be avoided.
7. Schools should target their portion of the £1 billion catch up fund on the vulnerable and disadvantaged children, who are most likely to have lost out on education during lockdown.
8. Next year's summer exams should be pushed back as far as possible, while ensuring that children receive results in time to progress to college or university as normal in the autumn.
9. Employers, universities and colleges need to be flexible in their assessment of students who were due to sit exams this year, along with those due to sit them next year, in recognition of the disruption to their education at such a critical time.

SEND

In the event of further lockdowns:

- > The legal changes which meant that children with EHCPs no longer had an absolute entitlement to the provision set out in their plans should not be reintroduced, either locally or nationally. The same should apply to the easements of EHCP timescales, which lapsed on 25 September.
- > Children on SEN Support (as well as those with EHCPs) should be entitled to attend school in the event of a lockdown.

- > Local authorities should do everything possible to ensure respite services for disabled children and their families continue to operate. The Government should provide additional funding to make this happen if necessary.

Towards long term recovery:

- > The Government should provide additional funding to local authorities to clear the backlog of EHCPs which have not been assessed or issued, as a result of the legal changes which relaxed the timescales which needed to be met.
- > The Department for Education should collect data on exclusions, attendance and withdrawals from the roll on at least a weekly basis for the autumn term (and possibly longer). This should be broken down by vulnerable groups – including children with EHCPs and SEN Support.
- > The SEND Review, which was promised before the Covid-19 crisis, must now be progressed as a priority.

Social care

In the event of future lockdowns:

- > The remaining regulations on virtual visits should be tightened to ensure they take place when essential to protect public health, with increased monitoring of how they are used. In the event of any future lockdown, regulation changes should only be made with due consultation and in order to increase protections for children who are likely to be particularly vulnerable.
- > Social work visits should be prioritised, with appropriate PPE and guidance on safe ways to conduct visits.

Towards long term recovery:

- > The forthcoming Spending Review should include a recovery package for children focused on targeted, preventative services for families to increase capacity due to Covid-19.
- > There should be new accountability measures for local authorities, police and CCG partners to encourage working together to achieve outcomes for children. This might include new requirements on actions they must achieve and/or independent scrutiny. Partners should be expected to use data intelligently to monitor children's progress and measure outcomes – the Children's Commissioner publishes the latest local data on risks and needs for this purpose¹¹⁸
- > The Care Review must be used as an opportunity to improve the circumstances and outcomes of all children in care and to address the crisis in capacity, particularly for those with complex needs. Beyond this, it must also look at how services can better support and work alongside families to prevent children ending up in care in the first place.

¹¹⁸ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/chldr/>

Health

In the event of further lockdowns:

- > The Government should review the rule of six over time with a view to exempting children under 12.
- > Restrictions over households should seek to exempt children under 12 to enable them to play together.
- > NHS England should issue further guidance to mental health providers, learning from good practice in the first lockdown.
- > The Government should launch a communications campaign to urge parents not to ignore concerns about their children's health and to continue to access services. This should include public health messages on how to support children's wellbeing.

Towards long term recovery:

- > Clear guidance should be issued to schools to focus on the mental health and wellbeing of their students.
- > The Spending Review should fund faster rollout of Mental Health Support teams in schools and further investment to increase access to low-level and specialist CAMHS services.

Early years

In the event of further lockdowns:

- > Guidance should make clear that babies and young children should be prioritised for visits in person from professionals such as social workers and provide adequate PPE for these to take place.
- > Local Authorities should monitor in real time the levels of referrals to children's social care, in order to identify levels of unidentified need.
- > Greater information sharing between agencies, supported by central government, should be enabled to ensure proactive outreach to vulnerable families.
- > In any future lockdown, early years education settings and health services should be kept open and visits should continue wherever possible.

Towards long term recovery:

- > Resources must be provided to allow missed health contacts and other outreach from early years services to take place, and to fully restore health visiting services.
- > An emergency recovery package for early years providers needs to be developed to allow them to stay open, including additional catch up funding.
- > A cross-government strategy for the early years is needed. This should include a Family Guarantee for under-fives and their families, with joined up support based around a national infrastructure of Children and Family Hubs.

Youth justice

In the event of further lockdowns:

- > The Youth Custody Service must operate on an appropriate basis for children. There should be distinct guidance for youth justice establishments (including YOIs) about how to implement Covid-19 restrictions in a way that protects children's welfare.
- > The numbers in Youth Offending Institutions and Secure Training Centres should be reduced to allow staff to focus on relationship building and providing consistent care to those who remain. This could in part be achieved by reducing numbers in custody on remand and by making greater use of the early release scheme.
- > The YCS should better protect timetables (including time out of cell, in-person education and activities in the fresh air) in line with children's best interests. Access to family and professional contact (digitally or otherwise) must be prioritised.
- > Access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and priority testing should be improved.

Towards long term recovery:

- > The development of secure schools should be fast tracked, and the capacity of Secure Children's Homes increased, to provide a better level of therapeutic support and education provision to children who remain in custody.

Housing

In the event of further lockdowns:

- > MHCLG should take decisive action to move all families from inappropriate housing in advance of a second lockdown, including any placement with shared cooking and/or bathroom facilities.
- > In the event of classes or whole schools being closed to most pupils, homeless children should be explicitly prioritised for access.
- > MHCLG should re-instate the eviction ban after it lapses, in the event of secondary lockdowns, local or national.

Towards long term recovery:

- > A package of support needs to be put in place for children who were homeless through lockdown, to address both their mental and physical health needs. This includes homeless children being given priority access to CAMHS and Health Visitors, as well as educational support through the £1 billion catch up fund.
- > A pre-emptive package of welfare and housing support needs to be introduced for families who have built up rent arrears, to counter a wave of family homelessness, particularly as the eviction ban has come to an end and the furlough scheme is replaced with the Jobs Support Scheme.

Family life

In the event of further lockdowns:

- > The Government, local authorities and police should make clear that children are allowed to play in public green spaces and should not be “moved on”.
- > The availability of green space for children should be maximised, which at a minimum should mean no closure of parks. Any definition of “exercise” should specifically include playing outdoors.
- > The messaging and enforcement of lockdown rules must be child friendly and in particular should avoid the criminalisation of teenagers.
- > Reintroduction of protections for incomes and food security implemented in the first lockdown should be a priority. In particular, Free School Meals vouchers should be available when needed.

Towards long term recovery:

- > Permission for holiday schemes over the coming year should be granted clearly and early, particularly if social distancing measures remain in place next summer.
- > Make the £20 uplift to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit, currently due to expire in April 2021, permanent.
- > Introduce an additional £10 per week child payment to further reduce financial pressures on families.
- > Decisions on removing or easing the Jobs Support Scheme should take into account the likely impact on child poverty.



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