

# Covid-19 and children's well-being

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POLICY BRIEFING

JAN 2022

Children and young people's health may have been less directly affected by Covid-19 than that of adults, but the indirect consequences of the pandemic are wide-ranging and long-lasting.

School closures, online learning, reduced time with friends, peers and teachers, together with delayed access to health care have had a dramatic effect on children and their families.

These constraints have immediate, medium and long-term implications for children's economic wellbeing, education and mental health. These must be understood completely if society is to prevent further harm, now and in the future.

This policy briefing provides an overview of the key findings of the Interdisciplinary Child Well-Being Network (ICWBN) online workshop, the programme and recordings of which are available at <https://icwbn.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/icwbn-workshop>

## Key Points:

- *Families need better support and a greater say on what will help them thrive.*
- *Covid-19 exposed weaknesses in the system and made the already difficult lives of vulnerable people harder.*
- *Children from disadvantaged backgrounds and with Special Educational Needs (SEN) have been hit hardest, but children from all backgrounds need support.*

## Introduction

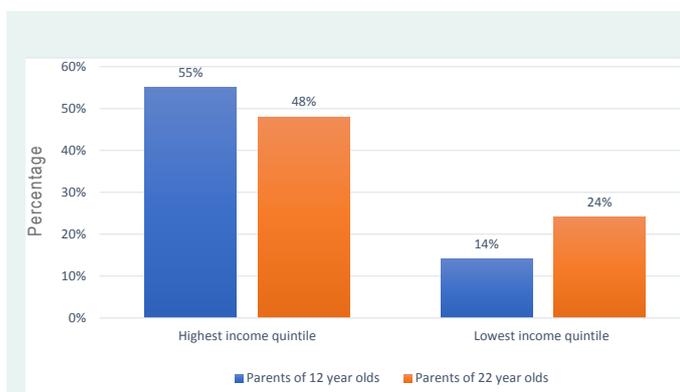
In September 2021, the ESRC/IRC-funded Interdisciplinary Child Well-Being Network (ICWBN) brought together academics and practitioners to discuss the consequences of the pandemic and associated policy responses for children's living standards, education, and mental health in the UK and Ireland. This policy briefing summarises research evidence presented at the workshop.

## Main findings

### Impacts on living standards

Through interviews with more than 100 parents and carers living on a low income during the pandemic, Jim Kaufman's research revealed that the pandemic created new problems and further exposed the inadequacies and weaknesses of government support systems. Participants said that limited shopping opportunities made it harder to budget. Others reported going without food so that their children could eat. The £20 Universal Credit 'uplift' cut and uncertainty around the furlough scheme also created considerable worries for many. Participants also reported that the negative impacts of benefit changes preceding the pandemic (benefit caps, waiting times, deductions and repayments, conditions and sanctions) were exacerbated by the pandemic.

Aisling Murray's research using the "Growing up in Ireland" Covid-19 survey showed that lower household income is associated with greater financial strain. More than half of high-income parents of 12-year-olds found it easy or very easy to make ends meet, compared with just 14% of those in the poorest households. Meanwhile, nearly half of 22 year-olds from high-income households said they were making ends meet easily compared with just a quarter of their poorer counterparts (Figure 1).



Source: 'Growing Up in Ireland: Key findings from the special Covid-19 survey of Cohorts '98 and '08. ESRI Growing Up in Ireland March 2021' <http://aei.pitt.edu/id/eprint/103462>

**Figure 1: Income differences in self-reported ease of making ends meet - percentage of making ends meet 'easily' or 'very easily'**

Jefrey Shumba looked at the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on disadvantaged communities in Tallaght, Ireland. Focus group discussions with 50 children, 17 parents and 20 service providers working with families revealed that many families were unable to afford to buy devices or access Wi-Fi. Parents had to use mobile data from their phones to help children access the platforms they needed whilst often struggling to access their own online education and training. Service providers said the scale of food poverty was greater than they thought. Children reported playing less, having to stay inside a lot more, and worries about passing on coronavirus to vulnerable relatives.

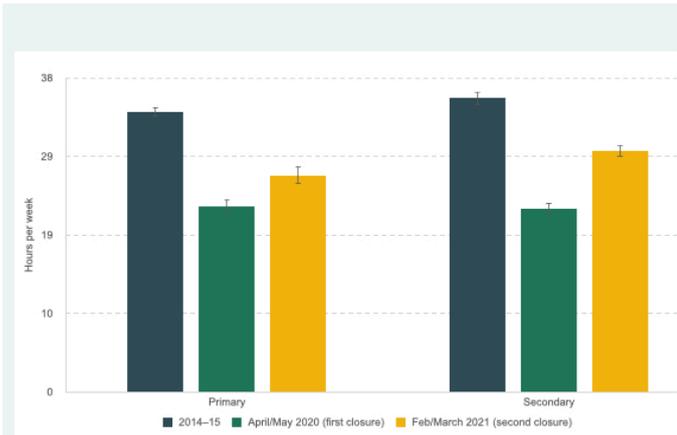
Finally, research that gathered information from 300 youth workers supporting 35,000 young people in Ireland throughout the pandemic found that young people had socially regressed, fallen behind in education, and were developing extreme views. In the study carried out by Sarah Edmonds, youth workers predicted a huge mental health fallout from the pandemic and said that support systems for young people transitioning into employment were neither in place nor adequate.

In 2021, almost two in five parents completing The Children's Society's annual household survey indicated that their family income had reduced since the pandemic began, and three in five said the pandemic had negatively affected their children's education. Louise Moore stated that nearly one in five 10-17-year-olds completing the charity's 2020 survey (during the first national lockdown in England) had low well-being.

### Impacts on education

A survey of 11,400 parents in England revealed new evidence about learning activities and resources provided by their children's schools. Adam Salisbury found that average weekly learning time for primary and secondary school children fell from around 35 hours in 2014/15 to 22 hours during the first lockdown, recovering slightly during the second period of school closures. Schoolchildren spent considerably more time in online classes during the second lockdown and less time on independent learning (Figure 2).

Birgitta Rabe showed that both online and offline lessons increased from the first to the second lockdown among primary and secondary school children. She also found socio-economic differences; white parents reported spending more time helping their children with schoolwork than Pakistani/Bangladeshi parents. Children from richer families and girls spent more time on schoolwork than their poorer peers and boys. Many parents/children made use of free learning resources regardless of their background.



Note: Pandemic sample is based on children aged 8 and above who are not attending school in person. Vertical lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

Source: UK Time Use Survey (2014-15); IFS-IoE survey, waves 1 and 2.

**Figure 2: Average weekly learning time among children learning remotely**

Office in Ireland in 2020 rose from 3% to 6% - most of these were about the digital poverty and divide, struggles with schooling, exams and grades, and anxiety around passing Covid-19 on to relatives. Children with SEN have been disproportionately affected and there were missed opportunities to protect children in their homes.

**Impacts on mental health**

Using data from a UK-wide longitudinal survey, Júlia Mikolai examined whether inequalities experienced by single parents before the pandemic were exacerbated by the pandemic. She showed that children's mental health worsened a little during the first lockdown but bounced back before slightly worsening again during the second lockdown. Children of single mothers who, pre-pandemic, were already faring much worse than their peers with two parents, were much less likely to bounce back than those in two-parent families.

UK research by Cathy Creswell tracking the mental health of 9,000 children, young people and parents through the pandemic showed increased behavioural, emotional, and attentional difficulties for children, especially those of primary school age, those with SEN, and those on low incomes. She showed that the mental health of children with SEN and those on low incomes was also less likely to recover towards the end of lockdowns.

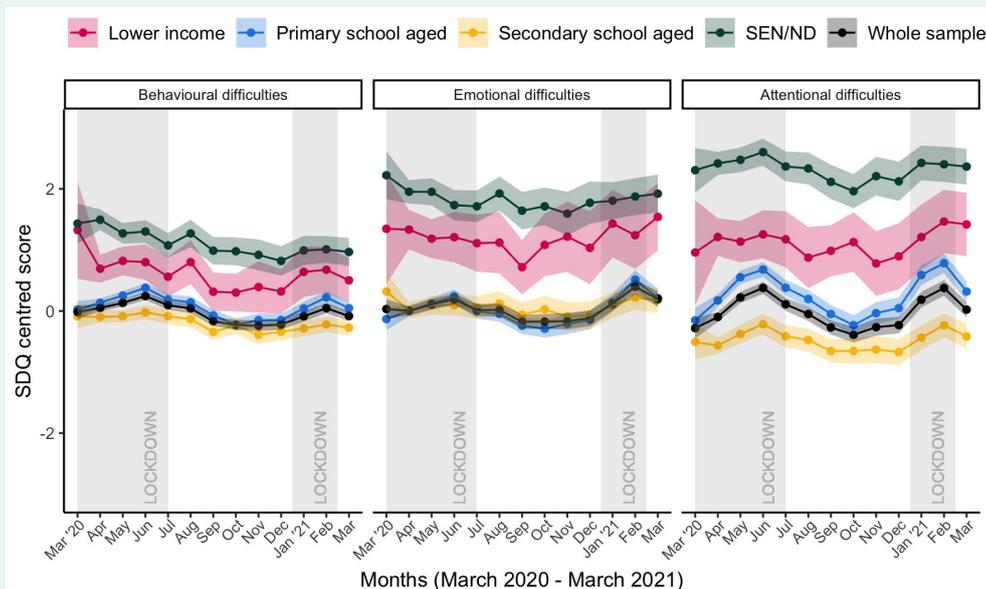
A linked Irish study, which tracked around 400 families across the pandemic, found similar patterns, with emotional difficulties emerging as a particular area of concern. Jennifer McMahon found that already vulnerable children were more likely to have pandemic-related anxiety, which was partly fueled by their parents' anxiety, particularly where they too had mental health issues.

However, richer families were more likely than poorer families to access paid-for learning resources during the lockdowns.

Using an Irish survey conducted during the first period of school closures, Yekaterina Chzhen revealed that 8-9-year-old children's engagement with remote learning was not related to how well-off a family was. However, higher engagement was linked with greater digital resources for learning (e.g., a laptop) and having schoolwork checked regularly by parents/teachers. Compared with other countries amongst the world's largest economies, Ireland had one of the longest periods of school closures.

Aoife McNamara of the Ombudsman for Children's Office, noted that complaints to the Ombudsman for Children's

**Figure 3: Changes in mental health symptoms over time: Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)**



Source: Co-SPACE study 'Young people's mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic' [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642\(21\)00177-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(21)00177-2)

Parents were deeply concerned about their children's mental health, education and exams, work life balance and perceived abandonment of families with children, especially those with SEN. Parents that reported being unable to cope with schoolwork were more distressed which also had a negative impact on their child's mental health. There was, however, a group of families who coped extremely well, finding new strategies and ways of being resilient.

Niamh Kelly of One Family Ireland reported that one-parent families started from a much lower base with higher rates of poverty and debt compared to two-parent families. With no one to share the load with, single parents found homeschooling much harder. Lack of childcare and support made it difficult for these parents to undertake everyday activities including working and shopping.

## Policy implications

The pandemic created new problems and challenges especially for less advantaged families already hard hit by austerity and for children with special educational needs or learning difficulties.

It exposed weaknesses and inadequacies in government support systems which failed to acknowledge and incorporate the experiences of those in need of help. It exacerbated pre-existing inequalities around the resources that can help a child do better in school and revealed the depth and extent of deprivation in certain areas. These effects are likely to have a long-lasting impact on their lives.

Between the two main school closure periods, learning recovered but still remained well below pre-pandemic levels. Learning inequalities between richer and poorer children are likely to have long-lasting effects. Families responded dynamically by compensating for the lack of education with free resources. Once schools increased their provision, children's time spent on schooling increased and parents' time spent on home schooling decreased accordingly.

Children and young people's mental health was badly affected by the pandemic, which has exacerbated pre-existing vulnerabilities. Children living with a single mother, those with special educational needs, and those from low-income households were especially likely to experience mental health issues.

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