

# COVID-19: Children, young people and families

## July 2020 Evidence Summary

### Key messages

COVID-19 continues to cause disruption to children and families' lives through school closures, physical distancing and changes in household employment and finances. As lockdown continues through different phases, a number of trends are emerging from the Scottish and UK evidence base which are set out below.

#### Physical and mental wellbeing

- Scottish household data shows that about a third of households with children have someone with a health condition that makes them vulnerable to COVID-19, and 8% of households with children have suffered a COVID-related bereavement. This has implications for children's wellbeing and return to school planning.
- Academic literature on risk factors for children's health and mental wellbeing during quarantine include prolonged duration, fears of infection, frustration and boredom, inadequate information, lack of in-person contact with classmates, friends, and teachers, lack of personal space at home, and family income loss. Many of these issues are evident in COVID-19 surveys.
- The growing evidence on the mental wellbeing of children and young people during this crisis is mixed and this makes it difficult to identify trends. This is due to differences and bias in survey samples and potential regional differences. Whilst most surveys suggest that the majority of primary-aged children in the UK and in Scotland are doing fairly well there is some evidence of a slight decline in primary-aged children's mental wellbeing.
- Although one survey reports no change, there does appear to be a continuing trend of young people reporting lower mental wellbeing over time. The trend of increasing loneliness is a particular concern, given that wider literature suggests that chronic loneliness can have a negative impact on young people's mental health, and that physical distancing may disproportionately impact on adolescents' wellbeing. Some forms of digital communication may mitigate this although further research is needed.

- Although girls' mental wellbeing appears to be more adversely impacted overall, there is mixed evidence on whether their mental wellbeing is deteriorating more than that of boys'.
- There is emerging, albeit limited, evidence that very young children may be missing out on play and spending long periods of screen-time during lockdown. This is concerning given the importance of social connection and play in early development.
- As lockdown eases in different parts of the UK, there is emerging evidence (from Ireland) that even where outdoor gatherings have been allowed, children are not regularly engaged in safe, outdoor play with children from other households. This suggests that there may be barriers to play and social connection as lockdown eases that warrant further investigation (e.g. difficulties in adhering to physical distancing rules, outdoor access to play areas, infection worry etc.).
- Some surveys report positive experiences in lockdown which may enhance children and young people's wellbeing such as spending more time with family, increased play time and outdoor time, better diet and relief from pressures such as bullying at school.
- There is emerging and mixed evidence on how the pandemic may be impacting on children and young people's physical health and wellbeing with some indication of age-related differences. Overall, primary aged children appear to be less affected whereas teenagers and pre-school children may be at risk of engaging in less physical activity than before lockdown. All groups appear to have been engaged in more screen-time during lockdown but more research is needed on the age-related merits and risks associated with this.
- Many parents are struggling to balance the needs of work and childcare, and this is reflected in a marked increase in adult mental health problems during lockdown, especially for women and parents with young children. Although most families are enjoying spending more time together, Scottish evidence reports that women in households with children had substantially worse mental wellbeing outcomes across all measures than men and were twice as likely to feel lonely. Given the wider evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on low income and single parent households, single mothers may be a particularly vulnerable group during this pandemic.

## Home learning and return to school

- A number of UK-wide parent surveys have reported differences in engagement, support and resources for home learning between lower and higher income families. These findings have raised concerns about educational inequalities and widening of the attainment gap. That said, some Scottish evidence indicates that regardless of income, the most important factor in relation to schools for many parents and carers is an emphasis on emotional support and friendships.
- There are early indications that the majority of parents in Scotland intend to send their children back to school in August, but many have expressed concerns about the 'blended learning' model, particularly parents of children with additional support needs (ASN) and disabilities. Families affected by disability or long-term health problems have voiced concerns about safety and how children's needs will be met when they return to school, as well as continued problems with access to IT equipment to support home learning.

## Children, young people and families with vulnerabilities

- **Low income families** appear to be experiencing lower levels of wellbeing during the pandemic than better off families in Scotland. Evidence suggests that those families with the least money have had to spend the most on educational resources. Key areas of concern for low income families include increasing levels of poverty, food insecurity, utility payments and fuel poverty, digital divide issues and family and child wellbeing (including isolation, loneliness and mental health issues). Low-income families are concerned with the longer-term effects of increased social isolation and household stress, and want schools to prioritise safe opportunities for children to rebuild friendships and play, and more pastoral (emotional) support for older children.
- There is some indication that some **lone parent families** in Scotland are under extreme pressure. UK evidence indicates that lone parent families have suffered greater financial losses than many other groups. Single parents appear to be at increased risk of loneliness and difficulties with supporting home learning (although previous evidence suggests that children from lone parent families are not losing out on education). Lone parent helplines report increases in stress and anxiety about finances and difficulty coping during the crisis.
- The UK and Scottish evidence on the experience of lockdown by **families impacted by disability** or illness and those with children with additional support needs continues to be one of unmet need and

increasing emotional and financial pressures. Despite some survey evidence suggesting that parents think children are coping fairly well, there are reports of a deterioration in children's health and wellbeing as time goes on. Some parents have not accessed healthcare for their children or themselves, and some are not taking up school places because of health concerns. Parents want more support, more and better tailored information (e.g. for shielding households) and flexibility in easing of lockdown to allow informal support to resume.

- English (qualitative) evidence from **young carers** reports that restrictions of lockdown and the anxiety related to COVID-19 risks has increased young carers' stress and their caring load significantly, particularly for older carers and those in single parent households. There are calls for children under the age of 18 living with a parent or sibling with substantial disability, physical health needs or mental ill health to be automatically regarded as a young carer during the on-going pandemic and supported accordingly.
- Evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on **black and minority ethnic (BME) children** and young people is still very limited and the findings mixed. Whilst a number of Scottish and UK surveys have found no obvious ethnic differences across a range of measures, there is some online mental health service data from England (along with previous English survey data from the University of Sheffield) that suggests otherwise. Further evidence is needed to determine the situation in Scotland, including the impact of COVID-19 on refugee and migrant families.
- Similar concerns are seen in the limited evidence available relating to **care-experienced children and young people**, for whom the current situation has exacerbated pre-existing issues. These include loneliness and social isolation; access to the internet; poor mental health; access to affordable and nutritious food; and financial insecurity. The living situation of some young people during lockdown is challenging e.g. due to family conflict, difficulties in moving out of temporary accommodation, and concerns about rent arrears.
- There is evidence that some children in Scotland are experiencing **domestic abuse** more acutely during lockdown. Key areas of concern are child contact arrangements, challenges of remote service delivery and high levels of need in some families. UK evidence suggests that domestic abuse may be slightly higher in households with children, whilst early indicators suggest an increase in domestic violence and child maltreatment.

- Emerging evidence suggests that the key issues facing **children and young people in the justice system** in Scotland are isolation and lack of contact with others, alongside boredom and lack of activity. This is particularly the case for young people in custody, some of whom lack access to digital resources and have lost contact with family, friends, and support services.

### **Impact on and access to services**

- Evidence indicates that digital/remote service interventions for child/adolescent mental health are more effective than those targeting other issues such as substance misuse and criminal behaviour. Given the emerging evidence about deteriorations in child/adolescent mental wellbeing combined with increased demand for online mental health support, this may offer a potential route for mitigation of mental health impacts, especially for adolescents who may be more vulnerable currently.
- Evidence on digital service provision more broadly shows that interventions which have some form of personalisation, interactivity and/or contact with a practitioner – rather than self-directed, non-interactive learning – are more likely to improve outcomes.
- The impact of delays and changes to the Scottish Justice System are reported to be causing stress and uncertainty for some young people. Experiences of remote service provision in youth justice are consistent with other studies: barriers include lack of technology and privacy at home, and the challenges of building new relationships.
- Third sector organisations continue to provide a range of creative and vital support packages to vulnerable children and families in Scotland, including food packages, utility and mobile phone top ups, online support sessions and online social groups.
- Services are keen to harness the opportunity that the pandemic has created to forge new, creative ways of working, and to examine how these may be sustained in the longer term (e.g. in Children's Hubs).
- As per the June briefing, there is continued demand for more targeted messaging for children and young people (to address ongoing issues around perceived lack of information and uncertainty) that is relevant to their circumstances e.g. children impacted by disability and/or living in shielding households etc. Wider literature highlights the importance of ensuring that any information about COVID-19 is age appropriate in order to avoid feelings of fear and guilt. There is also further indication

of a desire for more opportunities for young people to play an active role in supporting their communities during the pandemic.

### **Evidence gaps**

- Whilst evidence gaps are closing, they still exist in particular for young carers, BME families, lone parent families and looked after children in Scotland. Further qualitative evidence – to enable the voices and lived experience of children and families to be heard – is still needed across most vulnerable groups. Some of these research needs are being addressed in ongoing academic research, the findings of which will be shared at the earliest opportunity.
- As lockdown continues to be eased, further evidence will be required on how children, young people and families are understanding, complying and adapting to different lockdown phases in order to ensure that opportunities for restoring and improving children’s wellbeing are maximised.
- Given the potential negative impact of COVID-19 disease control measures on the wellbeing of children and young people, it is crucial to continue to monitor how the pandemic is affecting the lives of children and families in Scotland, particularly those that are disadvantaged or vulnerable in some way.

## Research Topics

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This document draws primarily on research on the social and emotional impact of COVID-19 on children and families, with a focus on primary-aged children and young people. It is intended to supplement and provide context to the weekly COVID-19 vulnerable children and adult protection datasets.

NOTE – Most of the COVID-19 surveys are drawn from self-selecting samples (a sample that a participant volunteers to be part of rather than being selected). This means that the findings are not representative of the wider population and are likely to be biased in some way. Results of individual studies should therefore be interpreted with caution.

## Views and experiences of children and young people

### General children, young people and parent/carer COVID-19 research

#### Scottish Evidence

[Connect](#) published interim findings from its second lockdown survey which asks parents/carers of children aged 0-18 for their views on children returning to school/nursery in August and repeats questions from the first survey on general wellbeing. The findings cover responses received between 27 May - 2 June, at which time there was 2,007 responses from 29 local authority areas. The survey closes on 30 June. General health and wellbeing findings are summarised below. Those related to home learning are reported in the 'Impact on Families' section:

- The three biggest parental concerns were children missing friends (73%), falling behind with school work (52%) and children's health and wellbeing (51%).
- Although there is an improving picture from parents in relation to having what they need to keep their children happy (up from 64% to 77%), one in five parents said that they did not have what they needed or were not sure.

#### UK Evidence

Some emerging evidence from other parts of the UK and Ireland indicate some positive impacts of lockdown for primary-aged children including an **increase in play and spending more time outdoors.**

[The Children's Commissioner for Wales](#) has published findings of its 'Coronavirus and me' survey which was completed by 23,700 children and young people aged 3-18. Full analysis of the survey results is underway which will include analysis by protected characteristics. Initial headline findings include:

- More than half (58%) of children and young people said that they have felt happy most of the time during the crisis and a large majority (84%) report feeling safe most of the time.
- Secondary school aged children had more negative feelings than younger children, with 16% feeling sad 'most of the time'.
- **Challenges for children with additional learning needs** included difficulties for children with dyslexia (home learning is mostly text based), changes in routine, and loss of contact with normal support structures.
- **Over half of children report playing more** than usual (53%) with a wide range of online and offline play described.
- Some of the positive experiences of lockdown include spending more time with their family, spending more time outdoors and relief for some from pressures such as mental health difficulties or bullying.

[Primary School Network Wales](#) has published early findings of its 'Happen at Home' survey for children aged 8-11 which has been completed by over 1000 children, a third of which were from a deprived area. These findings show that most **children are doing fairly well** during lockdown and in some cases better than before lockdown. These are interim findings; the survey is still open.

- Most children (91%) are managing to stay connected with their friends - by phone and game consoles - and have a space to relax (89%).
- Worry levels were the same as before lockdown.
- **Children's diets have improved** with children in deprived areas eating 20% more fruit.
- **Children are sleeping better and are more active** than they were pre-lockdown (20% more children were classified as active).
- **Children living in deprived areas report fewer places to play** (57% compared to 72% in non-deprived areas). Boys who felt their area was not safe had higher screen time.
- Most children felt they were doing well at school (87% girls and 80% boys) and felt that they were still part of their school community (76%).

[Mary Immaculate College \(MIC\)](#) in Ireland has published early findings from its Play and Learning in the Early Years Survey which asked parents of primary aged children (aged 10 and under) how lockdown had impacted on their children's lives. The survey was launched in May for two weeks during Phase 1 of the easing of restrictions in Ireland and was completed by 512 parents. The findings will be compared to those from a 2019 survey to examine differences in play, learning and child development, before and during the crisis. Key findings from the preliminary analysis are:

- Nearly all children aged 6 and over, and three quarters of those aged 4-5, understand social distancing measures and the reasons for them.

- Despite the easing of lockdown in Phase 1, **less than a third (27%) of children have played with children** from another household outdoors with social distancing at least once a week.
- Almost all children (90%) miss their friends and playing with other children (87%).
- **Almost 80% of children are engaged in more screen-time** compared to before the crisis, with some very young children spending as much as 5 hours per day because of parent work commitments.
- Although 63% of children are spending less time on school work (most children are spending less than 2 hours per day), 30% are spending more time reading and 74% are reported as **spending more time outdoors** (80% play outside every day).
- Some parents reported their children being more content due to the lack of scheduled activities and the increased opportunities for free play, especially imaginative and independent play.

[The Duke of Edinburgh's Award](#) has published high-level results from its lockdown survey which was completed by 9,913 DofE participants aged 14-25. The survey **paints a fairly positive picture** of how DofE respondents are managing during lockdown (though these young people may arguably be more motivated than other young people).

- The majority (57%) of respondents report to be coping fine or quite well with the loss of their usual routine, with almost half (48%) spending more time than usual being active, 47% using the time to learn a new skill or rediscover an old one, and 44% have become closer to friends and family.
- Most respondents report feeling bored (89%) and spending more time on screens since lockdown (83%) – although for most this was not seen to be having a negative impact on their mental health.
- Respondents biggest concern is the impact on education (71% are concerned the pandemic will impact their academic knowledge and skills), followed by the effect on their physical health and fitness (53%) and how lockdown may impact their mental health (46%).

Other surveys suggest increasing levels of emotional and behavioural problems in children and young people during lockdown.

[The Co-SPACE \(Oxford University\)](#) has published its latest (4<sup>th</sup>) report and supplementary reports from the *COVID19: Supporting Parents, Adolescents and Children in Epidemics (CO-SPACE)* study which include the first set of longitudinal analyses showing change in mental health symptoms over the course of lockdown. The monthly UK-wide survey is completed by parents of children aged 4-16 and young people aged 11-16. Adult respondents who completed both the first and second surveys (2,890) were mostly female, employed and white, and most have an average income above the national average >£30,000. It is therefore not a nationally representative sample. Some caution should be taken when interpreting the findings below as there

also appears to be some sample bias towards parents with primary-aged children with difficulties (emotional, behavioural and attentional)<sup>1</sup>. Adolescents who participated in both surveys (572) were typically from high-income, white British households with working parents, and so again, are not representative of young people across the UK.

Over a one-month period in lockdown:

- Parents/carers of primary school age children taking part in the survey report an increase in their child's emotional, behavioural, and in particular, restless/attentional difficulties.
- Parents/carers of secondary school age children report a reduction in their child's emotional difficulties, but an increase in restless/attentional behaviours.
- Adolescents taking part in the survey report no change in their own emotional or behavioural, and restless/attentional difficulties.
- Parents/carers of children with **Special Educational Needs (SEN)** and those with a pre-existing mental health difficulty report a reduction in their child's emotional difficulties and no change in behavioural or restless/attentional difficulties.
- Children from **lower income households** (only 17% of respondents) are reported to having higher emotional, behavioural and attentional difficulties than those from higher income households.
- Patterns of difficulties over time appear to be consistent across gender, ethnicity and household income i.e. any changes in mental wellbeing of children do not appear to be associated with these factors. However, given the sample bias, the findings in relation to income and ethnicity must be interpreted with caution.
- That said, in both surveys girls are slightly more likely to have higher emotional difficulties, and boys are more likely to have higher behavioural and attentional difficulties. However, it does not appear, as some other surveys have reported, that **girls' mental wellbeing is deteriorating at a faster rate than boys.**

The University of Oxford is running its [Achieving Resilience During COVID-19](#) (ARC) study. This is an international study which will track adolescents' mental health during the COVID-19 crisis to find out what promotes or hinders their resilience. [Early findings](#) from its first report, which covers the first three weeks of the study and includes responses from 233 parents and 321 young people, and further online updates show that:

- Teenagers are feeling more lonely, anxious, and depressed than parents as time goes on (although parents' levels of loneliness is also increasing).
- 35% of teenagers surveyed reported **feeling lonely** often or most of the time (compared to 17% parents). This is despite respondents spending

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<sup>1</sup> The parent sample of the follow-up survey were more likely have a primary school aged child (67%) or a child with a pre-existing mental health difficulties, and they were more likely to have reported more difficulties in the first survey than those parents that did not complete the second survey.

on average 3 hours per day on social media, mostly to keep in touch with people. Feelings of loneliness seem to increase with age (from 13 to 18).

- The main reason teenagers give for spending so much time on social media is that they didn't have anything better to do.
- There is a slight trend for **increases in anxiety and depression** over time (over the 3 weeks the survey had been running) in young people. However, a larger sample is needed across a longer period of time to draw any firm conclusions.

**The Co-SPYCE (Oxford University) study** published its first report of its UK-wide survey for parents/carers with children aged 2-4 and covered stress, child activities, child worries and need for support. The Co-SPYCE project is tracking the **mental health of pre-school** aged children throughout the COVID-19 crisis via an online survey completed monthly by parents/carers. This first report is based upon the data from the first 1728 parents/carers that completed the survey between 17 April and 20 May, most of whom were female (94%) and white (92%); the majority were working (63%) and had an average income of >£30,000 (81%). The results are not therefore currently representative of the UK population. Key findings of the first report are:

- Nearly  $\frac{3}{4}$  of participating parents/carers felt that they were not sufficiently able to meet the needs of both work and their pre-school child.
- The top 3 stressors for participating parents/carers were (i) work, (ii) child's screen time, (iii) their child's wellbeing. Although most children are spending 30 mins to 2 hours screen-time per day, **a quarter of young children are spending 3+ hours watching a screen** but not interacting with it.
- Over half of parents are worried that they aren't doing enough with their child (55%) and many lack confidence in entertaining their children (47%).
- **Many pre-school children are missing out on play and social interaction with other children.** Almost half of the children (47%) are reported to be spending no time playing with another child in their household, and half (51%) are reported as not communicating at all via phone, video call or message with friends outside their home.
- Over 8 in 10 of children are reported by participating parents/carers to be getting at least 30 minutes of exercise a day but only 22% are reported to be getting the recommended 3 hours.
- Participating parents/carers particularly want support around managing children's emotions, educational demands, behaviours and coming out of social isolation. They would like to receive this support via online written content and videos.

## Children and young people with mental health problems

### UK Evidence

XenZone, which provides online mental health support in England (funded by the NHS), has released new data from its Kooth service which is a 'free, safe and anonymous' online mental service provider for children and young people. Kooth has been publishing monthly data summaries derived from user data in England throughout lockdown. The [June summary](#) is drawn from a sample size of 42,732 users logging in during the period of 01/03/20-30/05/20 and 33,152 people last year over a similar period. Whilst the sample is very large, it is heavily biased towards children and young people with mental health concerns, and it provides an indication rather than a standardised measure of mental health problems<sup>2</sup>. It is not clear what age of children and young people the data covers. Some caution should be therefore be exercised when interpreting the findings:

- There has been a huge increase in demand for the Kooth online mental health service – logins are up 58% on last year, and this demand is rising during lockdown.
- The biggest increases are seen in health anxiety, sadness, worries about education and sleep issues.
- Young people using the service are increasingly lonely in lockdown, with data showing a 63% increase on the previous year, rising from a 31% increase recorded in April.
- Family relationships are a concern for increasing numbers of children and young people during lockdown, with a 30% increase in this as a presenting issue compared to the previous year.
- There is an increase of 16% in suicidal thoughts as a presenting issue and a 27% increase in self-harm compared to last year.
- Compared to last year there is a 74% increase in users presenting with gender identity issues.

Kooth has also released in-depth analysis of data about its users from BME backgrounds (see next section).

**Mental health charity [YoungMinds](#)** carried out a UK survey with 1,135 teachers and members of school or college staff (only 1% of respondents lived in Scotland) between 15th May and 1st June in the lead up to schools re-opening. The report calls for **pupil wellbeing to be the top priority** as children return to school. The results show that:

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<sup>2</sup> The presenting issues are registered against a service user following any interaction that displays this issue. This is typically during counselling, but could also be during any other interaction, such as comments in a forum. The comparison to last year is based on the proportion of the users that have presented with the particular issue, compared to the proportion last year, during the same time period.

- 74% of respondents agreed that schools being closed to most students over the period of lockdown has had a negative impact on the mental health of young people.
- 88% of respondents agreed that a lack of structure and routine has had an effect on student wellbeing, while 79% thought that increased anxiety stemming from the pandemic has had an effect.
- 73% of respondents reported concern about young people spending more time in unsuitable home environments over the course of the lockdown period and as schools gradually reopen.
- 78% of respondents reported that additional pastoral support, such as in-school counselling, would be helpful, in order to support children as they return to school.

### Emerging evidence on physical health and wellbeing

There is emerging and mixed evidence on how the pandemic may be impacting on children and young people's physical health and wellbeing, with some indication of age-related differences, which suggest that pre-school children and adolescents are most at risk of decreased activity levels.

- Research on young people suggests that lack of activity, boredom and increased screen-time could have negative impacts on their physical health (e.g. weight gain). One in four respondents to the [Lockdown Lowdown](#) survey in April said that they were moderately or extremely concerned about their own physical wellbeing (although concern was much higher for mental wellbeing). Other data reports an increase in sleep problems (see next section). Further evidence is needed, however, to explore how lockdown is impacting on young people's physical wellbeing.
- [The Children's Parliament](#) survey for 8-14 year olds reported age differences in self-reported good energy levels, making healthy choices and getting enough exercise, with older age groups (12+) less likely to agree with these statements. That said, in the May survey, the majority of children reported having plenty of energy (78%) (slightly higher for boys), making healthy choices (73%) (slightly higher for girls) and getting enough exercise (73%). Responses have not changed much over the course of lockdown, with the exception of energy levels which saw a slight (2%) decline between April and May.
- The Co-Space survey published [a supplementary report](#) on activity which shows that adolescents (11-16) are more likely than children (<10) to not have spent any time in the last week on physical activities (12%) or being outside (7%). This compares to only 2% on both counts for younger children.
- Other evidence – like the Welsh and Irish studies described above - indicates that many primary-aged children, although engaging in more

screen-time, are benefiting from an increase in play time, more time spent outdoors and healthier diets.

- The Co-SPYCE survey (above) suggests that although most pre-school children are getting some exercise every day, a significant minority are engaged in long periods of screen-time.
- Given what we know from evidence on health inequalities<sup>3</sup>, it is reasonable to assume that any negative impacts on health during the pandemic will be most keenly felt by those children and young people who have pre-existing health conditions and disabilities, those that are disadvantaged/living in poverty and/or those with previous experience of childhood adversity or trauma. There is already emerging evidence on the negative impact of lockdown on the health of children impacted by disability (see 'Children and families affected by disabilities' section). Evidence relating to food insecurity issues are also relevant here, particularly for children living in low-income households.

## Children in low income, lone parent and/or disadvantaged households

### Scottish Evidence

Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) has published the Scottish results of its ['Cost of a School Day' survey](#). The parent and child surveys ran during May to gather the views of families in Scotland in order to understand their experiences of learning during lockdown, with a particular emphasis on the experiences of households living on a low income. The online surveys were completed by 3,218 parents/carers and 1,074 children and young people in Scotland. The survey covered all local authorities but the findings are not based on a representative sample. Almost all parent/carer respondents were female; about a third of parent respondents had children who were eligible for FSM. About two thirds of child respondents were in primary school. The report finds that **families that were already living on a low income have been hit the hardest** by school closures. [A summary of the report for children and young people is available here](#). Key findings are:

On wellbeing in general -

- The findings show that family experiences of COVID-19 are varied and that schools are likely to find that pupils coming back will have very different lockdown experiences. While loss of learning loss is a concern for educators and policymakers, parents and young people who responded to the surveys are equally concerned with the longer-term effects of increased social isolation and household stress.
- Family wellbeing tended to be lower for those respondents living on lower incomes. In these households, children were more likely to be

<sup>3</sup> E.g. [https://www.gcph.co.uk/children\\_and\\_families/what\\_have\\_we\\_learned](https://www.gcph.co.uk/children_and_families/what_have_we_learned)

finding being at home difficult, and were more likely to report that they were struggling with learning and finding it harder to stay in touch with friends. Parents from low-income families, in particular, reported concerns about their children's wellbeing during school closures.

- For children and young people the top priority is reconnecting with their friends at school. As such, the report recommends that schools should prioritise safe opportunities for children to rebuild friendships and play.
- Young people and parents would have liked more emotional support from schools (e.g. pastoral support) to help them cope with mental health concerns.

On household finances –

- Eligible parents valued receiving support towards the cost of replacing free school meals. Most families reported that they preferred to receive support through direct payments, as this method allowed flexibility, dignity, safety and convenience.
- Families on low incomes would like more financial support and information about which grants and benefits are available to them.

On home learning and return to school –

In contrast to some other surveys, socioeconomic status did not hugely influence parental views about returning to school. Regardless of income, the most important factor for many parents and carers was an emphasis on emotional support, with many supporting a gradual, phased approach.

- Those families with the least money have had to spend the most on educational resources. Low-income family respondents were twice as likely to say that they lacked all the resources they needed to support home learning. A third of people most worried about money have had to purchase a laptop, tablet or other device during lockdown.
- Families who were worried about money were more likely to say they found it difficult to continue their children's education at home. In contrast, those with higher incomes were more likely to report that they were enjoying home learning.
- Single parents were twice as likely to strongly agree that they were struggling with their children's learning than families with two parents.

The report helpfully summarises other COVID-19 research relevant for low-income and single parent families:

- Millions of households have experienced significant drops in income, with low-income families with children facing greater financial losses than many other groups, in particular lone parent families<sup>1</sup>.
- A poll of 3,000 families receiving universal credit or tax credits in late May by JRF and Save the Children found that the crisis is causing seven in 10 of families to cut back on essentials, six in 10 to borrow money and over five in 10 to be behind on rent or other essential bills.<sup>2</sup>

- Households with children are disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Polling analysis by the IPPR showed that of the 49% of households with children who reported struggling financially, 29% said that they were struggling to make ends meet and 20% were in serious financial difficulty.<sup>3</sup>
- Many single parents have been adversely impacted by COVID-19 lockdown measures. One Parent Families Scotland has experienced a 240 per cent rise in calls to their lone parent helpline, with many callers describing increasing stress and anxiety about their financial situation and difficulty coping during the crisis.<sup>4</sup>

[Save the Children Scotland](#) (in collaboration with other third sector organisations) has published a short evidence paper on the **impact of the pandemic on families on low incomes** – as heard from families, communities and partners. The report highlights the multiple disadvantages that some families face in particular, lone parents, families with a disabled adult or child, young mothers, minority ethnic families, families with a child under 1, and larger families and calls for additional funding for third sector organisations to meet increased demand for hardship funds. The key areas of concern are:

- **Poverty** - Universal Credit claims in Scotland have increased during the pandemic to more than five times the average amount in 2019. The report states that universal credit is insufficient to prevent hardship in some families. Families who previously had been just about managing now being pulled into poverty.
- **Food insecurity** - The current crisis is exacerbating levels of food insecurity. Third sector organisations are consistently reporting increased demand for food packages.
- **Utilities** - Many families are struggling to pay utility bills and fuel poverty is likely to increase. Organisations are struggling to meet demand for energy grants.
- **Digital divide** - The current crisis has shone a light on the stark digital divide experienced by many low income families. The lack of devices and internet access impacts children's learning, staying in touch with others, and a household's ability to claim and access benefits.
- **Wellbeing** - The stress and anxiety experienced by many low-income households has been compounded by social distancing measures. Organisations are reporting that some of the most significant challenges facing families include isolation, loneliness and mental health issues. Lone parents are particularly at risk of loneliness, with many parents reporting an increase in stress and anxiety about their financial situation and coping during this crisis when contacting helplines.

[Growing2gether](#), which is a Scottish youth-based mentoring programme in schools (disengaged young people mentor small children), has undertaken a small survey with the young people they work with on how they are coping with lockdown. This survey was carried out between 27 April and 14 May and received 53 responses. The key findings are:

- Whilst about a third of respondents said that their situation has worsened since the onset of COVID-19, nearly 1 in 4 respondents said that they are doing better, or much better – however the report suggests that this may be because of reduced social and academic pressures associated with school and is likely to worsen on return to school.
- The three most common mental wellbeing issues were loneliness, worry about their mental health and general anxiety.
- Most respondents have been accessing support from their guidance teacher. However, some respondents said that they had less support from their friends and teachers than they had before.
- The most common activities that respondents have enjoyed or found supportive include keeping in touch with friends and family, watching series/movies, spending time with family and exercise.
- Almost all respondents have the right electronic devices to access online support.
- The main message respondents would give to other young people is that they are not alone, and to stay connected and keep busy.

#### UK Evidence

[Streetgames](#), which is an organisation in England and Wales that works with disadvantaged young people, has published a report on the impact of lockdown on young people living in deprived areas, based on responses from 270 community organisations and 188 young people. Key insights are:

- Home conditions for young people in low income households can be challenging due to **overcrowding** and **limited private space**.
- Many of the impacts of lockdown on young people living in deprived areas are similar to those reported elsewhere. **The top issue for young people is loneliness and isolation**, with 77% of them citing their inability to socialize with friends and family as their biggest concern.
- Young people report **deteriorating mental health and wellbeing**. Increased stress and family tension is having a detrimental impact on mental wellbeing.
- Other impacts include **lack of structure** leading to young people struggling to cope with daily life (e.g. sleeping in and staying up late), and reduced physical activity.
- A **lack of resources** for play and sporting activities (e.g. footballs, board games) and for home learning and connectivity (e.g. internet access) are cited.

Concerns have been raised in a survey by the 'Centre for Social Justice' and the charity organisation 'The Difference' about destinations for pupils in schools for excluded children. The [report](#) is based on survey responses in June from teaching staff at 86 Alternative Provision schools in England. The report raises concerns about the destination of young people who have been excluded, in particular the heightened risk of children being not in education, employment or training (NEET) in September; their increased vulnerability to criminal or sexual exploitation, and serious mental health problems.

The aforementioned [Connect survey](#) reported that families under extreme pressure e.g. lone parent families raised concerns about still not receiving the communication and support they need.

## Children and families affected by disability

### Scottish Evidence

Interim findings from the aforementioned **second lockdown survey** by [Connect](#) which asked parents/carers of children aged 0-18 for their views on children returning to school/nursery in August reported the following findings in relation to children with disabilities or ASN:

- Parents of children with additional support needs (e.g. autism, dyslexia, bereavement, mental health issues) raised concerns about **still not receiving the communication and support they need**.
- Parents of children with disabilities or health conditions expressed **uncertainty about children returning to school** and how their needs would be met. This echoes the findings from the Family Fund surveys\* above.

### UK Evidence

[The Disabled Children's Partnership](#), which is a coalition of more than 70 charities published findings of its parent/carer survey of their experiences during lockdown. The survey was completed by 4,074 parents/carers of which 13% were from Scotland (530). Most of the respondents were mothers (92%) and a quarter were lone parents. Most of the children that responses relate to were aged 5-15 years old, with the most common disabilities being learning, communication and behaviour, emotional and social difficulties. Key findings are set out below:

### Key issues

- The top three challenges during lockdown have been children's behaviour and mental wellbeing; managing home-schooling; and fear of what will happen children if the parent were to contract COVID-19.

- The lockdown is increasing financial pressures on families due to both a reduction in income (39%) and an increase in household costs (61%). One in five respondents (21%) said they will go into debt as a result.
- The top three most helpful things would be an increase in carers allowance or disability benefits (54%), sensory toys and equipment (46%) and outdoor play and leisure equipment (46%).
- Parents would like to see increased support (both financial and services), more information tailored for families with disabled children (77% of respondents agreed that government information about shielding is confusing) and flexibility in easing of lockdown to enable family and friends to provide support.
- Consistent with other surveys, parents are very concerned about children returning to school with top issues included safety, good planning and communications, challenges for families who are shielding and mental health support. **Concerns about their children's health has led some families to not taking up a school place.**

#### Lack of support

- Parents reported a significant increase in the amount of care being provided, both by themselves and their disabled children's siblings. Parents report feeling exhausted, stressed and unsupported.
- Half (51%) of those that were receiving therapies or other extra support say this has now stopped. Parent respondents have also seen a significant delay in statutory assessments and annual reviews.
- **The lockdown has stopped many parents seeking necessary medical healthcare** for their disabled children (44%), themselves or their partner (54%) or their non-disabled children (17%).
- There is mixed evidence with regards to home learning support with about a third of parent respondents saying they have not received any support specific to their child's needs, and about a quarter saying they were getting good support.

#### Physical and mental health impacts

- Most respondents think that their disabled children (71%), and their siblings (82%) are **dealing with lockdown fairly to very well.**
- However, the majority of respondents (70-80%) report **worsening emotional and mental health** for both their children and themselves (a third said that their child's emotional and mental health is a lot worse); although a minority report improvements.
- There is less concern about children's physical health, with around 1 in 10 respondents saying their children's general health is a lot worse.

### Young carers

UK Evidence

[The University of East Anglia](#) has published its report on 'Understanding the needs of young carers in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic'. This qualitative research study involved 20 interviews with young carers, parents of young carers and a small number of youth workers.

- The report calls for any child under the age of 18 living with a parent or sibling with substantial disability, physical health needs or mental ill health to be **automatically regarded as a young carer during the on-going pandemic** and supported accordingly.
- Young carers want increased awareness about what it means to be a young carer amongst health, social care, school staff, the general public and their own peer group. They also want choice in the services they receive and how they engage. Many have **valued the online support** provided during lockdown.
- The restrictions of lockdown and the anxiety related to COVID-19 risks **increased both the young carers' stress and their caring load**, with some unable to leave the house due to the physical vulnerability of the person they care for.
- In line with research with families impacted by disability, there has been a significant **drop in support** which has meant some young carers are now in full-time caring roles. Assessments, services and informal support had been cancelled or withdrawn. Essential services such as shopping delivery, child care and cleaning had fallen to the young carers.
- The lack of support from friends and wider family was keenly felt by the young carers and their families, while a **strong desire for the routine and respite of school** was prominent throughout the young carer interviews.
- **Caring responsibilities for older young carers and those in single parent households had increased exponentially since lockdown.** This included greater responsibilities both for the person they were caring for and their younger siblings, which has impacted on their ability to engage with home learning.
- Recommendations include for schools to give careful consideration to the support individual young carers will require on return to school, and the importance of ensuring that young carers' voices are central to all aspects of research, policy and service development.

## **Black and minority ethnic (BME) children and families**

UK Evidence

[Data from the Kooth service](#) (see previous section) was also released in June showing that the mental wellbeing of children and young people of BME backgrounds in England appears to be affected disproportionately over the

last three months compared with their white counterparts. The findings compare mental health data<sup>4</sup> from Mar-May in 2019 and 2020. It is based on a sample size of over 9000 BME young people (approximately 20% of the total user population). The findings report that children and young people from BME backgrounds in England, who have used the Kooth service, are showing greater increases in depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicidal thoughts than white peers during the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings are summarised below:

- **Anxiety and stress** is the most significant presenting issue for BME children and young people, with 32% presenting with this issue. Other areas of concern are sleep difficulties, family relationship issues and concerns about education.
- **Depression** among BME children and young people has increased 9% compared to a fall of 16% in white children and young people.
- **Suicidal thoughts**, self-harm and anxiety all saw significantly higher increases than were seen among young white people.
- Reasons given for the increase in mental health problems in BME children and young people is the higher risk of BME people dying from COVID-19 (in the absence of information on why this is or what can be done to prevent this increased risk) and lengthy school closures.
- The importance of BME role models and practitioners in the field of mental health is underlined.

An [evidence briefing](#) from the Fawcett Society, in partnership with The Women's Budget Group and Queen Mary University of London, outlines some findings from an adult online panel survey conducted in mid April (n=3,280). The survey is nationally representative with booster samples for parents with primary-aged children, people with a low income and BAME respondents. Key findings in relation to BME families are:

- BAME mothers in particular reported that they were struggling to feed their children (24%, compared to 19% white mothers).
- BAME women were most likely to report that they were struggling with balancing work and childcare.
- BAME women are even more worried about debt and their household income than the high levels among white women or men, with particular concerns for parents.
- Life satisfaction and happiness were lowest for BAME women, and anxiety was highest for all women compared to men.

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<sup>4</sup> The presenting issues are registered against a service user following any interaction that displays this issue. This is typically during counselling, but could also be during any other interaction, such as comments in a forum. The comparison to last year is based on the proportion of the users that have presented with the particular issue, compared to the proportion last year, during the same time period.

## Care experienced children and young people

Scottish Evidence

[STAF \(Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum\)](#) published its report 'COVID-19: the impact on care leavers and STAF member organisations that support them' in early June. It is based on feedback from staff (via focus groups) and young people involved in STAF's Youth Justice Voices and Project Return. The report states that young people and those who support them are concerned that the current situation has exacerbated many of the issues that care-experienced young people already face.

- These include **loneliness and social isolation**; access to the internet; poor mental health; access to affordable and nutritious food; and financial insecurity. In addition, the living situation of some young people during lockdown is challenging e.g. due to family conflict, difficulties in moving out of temporary accommodation, and concerns about rent arrears.
- Other issues raised include childcare (e.g. young parents not able to access hubs), health (e.g. changes in methadone prescriptions), employment (e.g. delays in universal credit), concerns about impact on foster carers, impact of bereavement and **unaccompanied asylum-seeking children** (concerns around delays to asylum claims as a result of the current situation).

## Children and families impacted by domestic abuse

We know from research on previous disease outbreaks, natural disasters and humanitarian crises that domestic abuse and violence against women increase during and after these types of events.<sup>5</sup>

Scottish Evidence<sup>5</sup>

Justice Analytical Services has published its [report](#) on emerging trends from this qualitative evidence (from 42 third sector and statutory organisations) which highlights similar issues, particularly in relation to child contact arrangements. The report covers the lockdown period 30/3/20 - 22/05/20.

- Services report that, **in some cases, children have experienced domestic abuse more severely during lockdown** because of increased time spent in isolation with the perpetrator.
- There have been several reports of children being present in the room during domestic abuse, including physical violence. Many services perceive that because children do not have access to safe spaces or

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<sup>5</sup> SG gathers data on the number of domestic abuse incidents that have been recorded by Police Scotland as part of its weekly COVID-19 Adult Public Protection weekly data report.

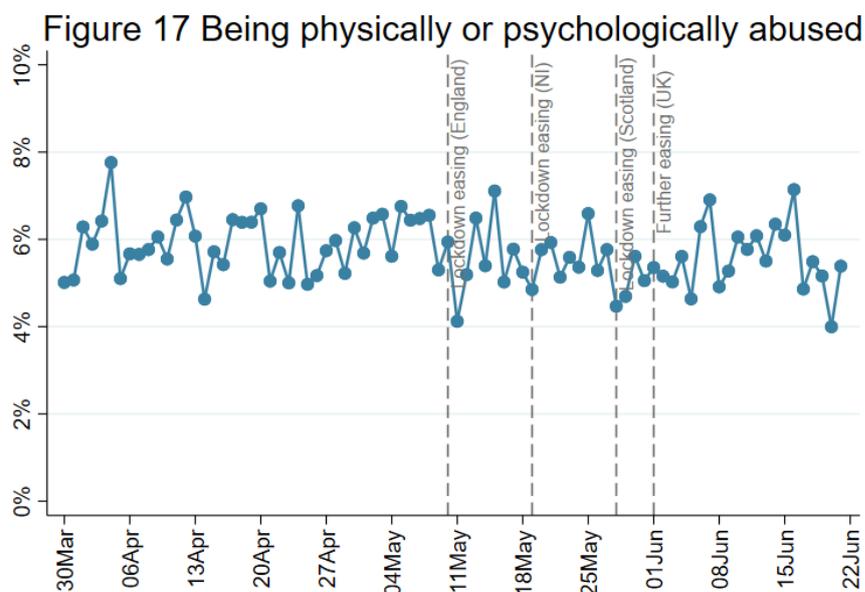
other trusted adults, there are **fewer opportunities for them to report** and therefore the perpetrator is less cautious.

- Services reported a similar range of abusive behaviours apparently specific to lockdown related to **conflict over child contact**. Police Scotland has received calls regarding conflict over child contact and attended some incidents where children had witnessed physical violence.
- Other common concerns around child conflict included children being exposed to other people during contact visits (this has been particularly difficult for parents who are shielding), and perpetrators asking children to show them round the house during video-contact.

### *UK Evidence*

**The UK Co-SPACE study** (referenced earlier) reported that 12% of parents that have sought advice (only 23% of all parent/carer respondents) have done so for help with managing family conflict; 5% of have sought advice for 'managing conflict in my relationship with my partner'.

**The UCL's Covid Social Study** (see 'Impact on Families' section) in its [most recent 14<sup>th</sup> report](#), presents data on self-reported measures of physical and psychological domestic abuse during the course of the pandemic across the UK. As the table below shows, abuse has remained relatively stable since the easing of lockdown was announced (between approximately 4-7%). Abuse has been reported to be higher amongst adults under the age of 60, those with lower household income and those with existing mental health conditions. It is also slightly higher in people living with children compared to those living with just other adults. The report notes that not all people who are experiencing abuse will necessarily report it, so these levels are anticipated to be an under-estimation of actual levels.



Source: UCL Covid-19 Social Study Results Release 14 (Fancourt et al., Jun 2020)

A [short briefing](#) by the University of Birmingham suggests that indicators point to a **marked increase in domestic violence** (estimated 30% increase) and child maltreatment related to COVID-19. This includes a threefold rise in the number of women killed by men in Mar/Apr in the UK compared to other years over the same period, and intelligence from the NPCC and third sector organisations.

**Women's Aid** has published an [evidence briefing](#) on the impact of COVID-19 on survivors and their children. The survey was completed in April by nearly 300 women with experience of domestic abuse, 40% of whom had a disability or long term health condition. The majority of respondents were white, and thus the experiences of BME women are under-represented. Although the report does not distinguish between respondents with or without children, it describes how many children are experiencing lockdown in homes where they are more exposed to abuse and child contact arrangements are being used to further abuse and are placing children at risk of further harm. Other issues relevant to children include difficulties accessing medication for themselves and/or their children and inability to access support (e.g. online counselling) due to childcare.

**The NSPCC** has also published a [briefing](#) on the impact of domestic abuse on children and young people during the coronavirus pandemic. Based on intelligence from Childline and the NSPCC helpline during Mar-May, the briefing reports that there has been an increase in the number of people worried about domestic abuse and an increase in the number of counselling sessions Childline has delivered about domestic abuse. Key themes include

reduced access to support networks; lockdown bringing domestic abuse into sharp focus; making it harder to speak out; making it more difficult to leave; drinking during lockdown; exploiting fears about the coronavirus; and young people worried about other family members.

## Children in contact with the Justice System

### Scottish Evidence

The [Centre for Youth Crime and Justice](#) (University of Strathclyde) has conducted a short qualitative research project to provide a snapshot of the views of children and young people in contact with or with experience of youth justice services and youth justice practitioners on COVID-19. The report captures the views of approximately 50 young people aged 12-25 which were mostly gathered by service providers, and responses from 36 practitioners in a range of settings including in the community, in secure care and in HMP & YOI Polmont during the month of May. Some of the key points are -

- The biggest issues facing children and young people in the justice system are **isolation and lack of contact** with others. This is compounded for some by a lack of resources (e.g. a phone or phone credit). Despite this, almost all respondents reported being able to keep in touch with family and youth justice services.
- **Boredom**, lack of activity and been stuck at home were reported as a significant issue for children and young people. Related to this, mental health, family conflict, breakdown of home circumstances, substance use, compliance with restrictions and the risks associated were noted.
- The need for ensuring people have things to do and **access to technology/data** is crucial – to help maintain social connections, improve/maintain mental wellbeing and engage in education. **People in custody may have heightened needs** in terms of requiring more purposeful activity and resources (e.g. phone credit) and access to contact with friends and family.
- Most children and young people were reported as complying with COVID-19 restrictions. However, this has become more difficult as time has gone on.
- There are some children and young people for whom the impact of COVID-19 and associated restrictions has been more significant, exacerbating previous experiences and issues such as addictions issues, **mental health concerns**, lack of support, and care experience, as well as for those with their own children, or without/with insecure accommodation.
- Overall the findings suggest that children and young people have had **limited contact with the police** during this time and that the responses by police have been appropriate. That said, there were reports of young people actively avoiding police contact (due to anxiety) or

experiencing negative contacts (e.g. being arrested or feeling unfairly targeted by police). Some practitioners have seen a reduction in offending, whilst others have seen a change in types of offences (e.g. increases in shoplifting and COVID-19 related offences like spitting). Practitioners also highlighted a small number of concerns about wider criminalisation of children and young people.

**The STAF report** (see earlier), also raises concerns about the isolation of young people in custody. Many do not have access to digital tools and have lost contact with family, friends, and supporting agencies. Concerns about the long-term impacts of reduced throughcare services is also highlighted. In line with the CYCJ report, there is a concern for all care-experienced young people that breaching the lockdown rules (which due to increased loneliness and boredom may be a risk) may lead to police contact and fines that they may be unable to pay.

## Other child safeguarding-related research

### UK Evidence

The above University of Birmingham briefing states that there is emerging evidence from services such as Childline and Barnardo's that child abuse has risen since lockdown, evidenced through the increase in online contacts through live chat channels and websites and telephone calls and texts. The Kooth mental health online service (see 'Children and young people with mental health problems' section), has also released data about young service users' experiences of abuse and neglect during lockdown in England. The mental health service is free and anonymous; data is based on what presenting issues are registered against a service user - typically during counselling but it could also be during any other interaction such as comments in a forum (which may be less reliable). The [April](#) and [May](#) data releases show increases in issues recorded as concerning child sexual exploitation (in particular), emotional abuse, child abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and neglect (to a lesser extent), compared to the same period in 2019.

## Impact on families

### COVID-19 adult surveys – households with children

#### Scottish Evidence

Analysis of data from a Scottish household wellbeing Covid survey<sup>6</sup> was undertaken internally. It analyses data from 266 households with children. Unlike many of the COVID-19 surveys to date, this is based on a small but representative sample of the Scottish population in terms of age, gender, region and tenure. Key findings for families in Scotland are:

- About a third of households with children (32%) had someone with a health condition that makes them vulnerable to COVID-19;
- Nearly one in ten households with children (8%) had suffered a COVID-related bereavement;
- Nearly a quarter of respondents had been furloughed (23%) and a fifth (20%) had reduced their hours;
- 44% of respondents said their household income had decreased since the crisis, with nearly a fifth of households with children struggling to keep up with bills and a third (32%) are worried about their financial situation or losing their job;
- Just under a third (31%) said they were worried about children's learning and education [the survey did not include questions about children's health and wellbeing]
- Although the majority of respondents reported feeling happy (60%), a substantial minority (43%) of respondents were less happy than on a typical day before the coronavirus pandemic. However, 15% said they felt happier than previously. A similar pattern was seen for levels of anxiety.
- 44% of respondents reported that they had felt lonely in the last week.
- Women had substantially worse mental wellbeing outcomes across all measures than men. Women were more than twice as likely as men to report high anxiety and low happiness, and were twice as likely to have felt lonely. They were also far more likely to feel cut off from family and friends and to be sleeping badly.
- 75% of respondents said that they were enjoying spend more time with their family, but about a fifth said that they had been having arguments with people they lived with including their children.

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<sup>6</sup> [The Impact of Covid-19 on Wellbeing in Scotland](#)

## UK Evidence

**University College London** continues to report on its '[Covid-19 Social Study](#)' which is an adult panel study of over 90,000 respondents focusing on the psychological and social experiences of adults living in the UK during the Covid-19 pandemic. The most recent report analyses data from [Week 14](#) (data up to 21<sup>st</sup> June). This study is not representative of the UK population but is adjusted (weighted) to enable meaningful analysis across a wide range of socio-demographic factors. Approximately 6.5% of survey data used in the report is from Scotland. Key findings of relevance to children and families are:

- People living with children are more likely to say that they have been enjoying lockdown than other groups (e.g. younger and older adults, those living alone, living alone) and whilst life satisfaction was previously lower amongst people with children during lockdown, this difference has disappeared as lockdown has eased. They are also more likely to say that they will miss being in lockdown. That said, overall enjoyment levels across the UK population are still fairly low - 32% of all respondents reported enjoying lockdown while 46% reported not enjoying it.
- People living with children continue to report higher rates of depression and anxiety, and loneliness, as do young people, those living alone, those with lower household income, people with a diagnosed mental illness and people living in urban areas (levels have remained fairly stable over the past 2 weeks). It is not possible to tell from the analysis which is the most predictive factor. Gender differences are not reported.
- People living with children have worried more about all factors which were causing them stress in the last week (e.g. catching COVID-19, employment, access to food), but the differences on worries relating to COVID-19 and food access has diminished as lockdown has eased.

### How parents are coping in lockdown

## UK Evidence

[The Institute for Fiscal Studies](#) published its report in June on the 'mental health effects of the first two months of lockdown and social distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK'. The study uses longitudinal data from the Understanding Society study (see below), combined with data from the new COVID-19 survey completed by study participants in April (sample size of nearly 12,000) to provide estimates of a 'COVID effect' on mental health. Findings of relevance to children and families show that, similar to the Scottish data described above, **mental health has deteriorated in particular for**

**women, young people and those with children, especially young children.** Those with very young children (aged 0-4) saw a significantly larger increase in overall mental health problems (but not severe problems), and this effect is twice as high for women compared to men – perhaps reflecting the uneven distribution of childcare under lockdown (see the Nuffield Foundation report below). Those with school-age children (aged 5-15) also saw a larger increase in mental health problems (but the effect is not as strong as the younger child group). There was **no evidence of significant differences by ethnicity** or whether individuals are single or live alone or by educational qualifications.

[The Nuffield Foundation](#) has published a further update from their project 'The effects of COVID-19 on families' time-use and child development'. This report focuses on how two-parent households (mother and father) in England are balancing work and family under lockdown. It covers data collected between 29 April and 15 May from 3,591 respondents. The sample is representative of parents in opposite-gender partnerships in England. Key findings of relevance are:

- On average, parents are doing childcare during 9 hours of the day, and housework during 3. Paid work now takes up an average of just 3 hours, which is less than half of pre-lockdown estimates. Parents are now often doing at least two activities at the same time, particularly mothers.
- Mothers are more likely to have quit or lost their job, or to have been furloughed, since the start of the lockdown.
- Nearly half of mothers combine paid work with childcare activities (47% compared to 30% of fathers) and are more likely to spend more time on household responsibilities than fathers.
- More than half of the time spent looking after children is taken up with 'passive childcare' (56% for mothers and 61% for fathers) such as keeping an eye on the children, rather than 'active childcare' such as doing schoolwork or playing together.
- Women are more likely to multitask during work time than men. Mothers are being interrupted during 57% more of their paid work hours than fathers. This was not the case before the crisis.
- The division of childcare and housework is not equally shared – mothers who are still working (where the father is not) share childcare and housework equally.
- Despite doing less childcare than mothers, fathers have nearly doubled the time they spend on childcare during lockdown.

## Families' experiences of home learning

### Scottish Evidence

Interim findings from the aforementioned second lockdown survey by [Connect<sup>7</sup>](#) which asked parents/carers of children aged 0-18 for their views on children returning to school/nursery in August reported the following:

- Whilst **59% of respondents said they plan to send their children back to school**, only 28% said they would be fine with blended learning/part time school.
- One of the most common reasons given for the small proportion of parents who do not intend to send their children back to school (3%) was **having to shield at home**.
- Parents of children with disabilities or health conditions expressed uncertainty about children returning to school and how their needs would be met (see 'children and families impacted by disability' section).
- More families now have the resources they need to support school work (68% up from 51%) but there are **still some households who do not have the IT equipment/access that they need**, or the skills to support IT use or school work in general e.g. due to English as an additional language.

### UK Evidence

**The Understanding Society COVID-19 study** is a monthly survey which examines the experiences of the UK population to the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey is part of the *Understanding Society: the UK Household Longitudinal Study*, which is a representative survey of UK households (including Scotland) and enables researchers to compare pre and post-lockdown data. 17,450 participants (16+) completed the first survey in April. Relevant findings from the [health report](#) and the [home learning report](#) are described below.

- Consistent with other evidence, younger people and women report higher levels of loneliness than older people and men.
- Home schooling can be stressful for parents, particularly mothers. The experience of psychological distress increases with the number of hours both men and women (especially) spend doing housework or home-schooling. The association appears to be driven by hours spent home-schooling rather than hours doing housework.
- The amount of time parents spend actively helping their children with schoolwork does not vary much by parents' educational background, although children whose parents have degrees are more likely to spend

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<sup>7</sup> The findings cover responses received between 27 May - 2 June, at which time there was 2,007 responses from 29 local authority areas. The survey closes on 30 June.

4 or more hours than those with parents with a GCSE or lower level qualification, and highly educated mothers spend more time doing childcare and home schooling than less-educated mothers.

- Children in single parent households do not appear to be losing out on home learning or childcare. A higher proportion of pupils (59%) living in single parent households have their own computer compared to those living with more than one adult in a household (44%). Single parents spend the same amount of time on childcare and home schooling than multiple adult households, although they do spend more time on housework.
- Only 4% of pupils have no access to a computer, laptop or tablet. However, 51% of pupils need to share their devices with others.
- Boys are doing less schoolwork at home than girls - 58% of boys and 70% of girls spend 2 hours or more a day doing their schoolwork. Few children are doing 4 or more hours schoolwork per day, particularly younger age groups.

**Francis Green of University College London (UCL) Institute of Education** has published his paper '[Schoolwork in lockdown: new evidence on the epidemic of educational poverty](#)'. This draws on data from the same Understanding Society COVID Survey. His report focuses on a sample of 4,559 children.

- One fifth of pupils did no schoolwork at home, or less than an hour a day – and this was reported as highest in Scotland (26%). Only 17 percent did more than four hours a day (14% in Scotland).
- Children in receipt of free school meals are far less likely to have spent more than four hours on schoolwork (11%) than other children (19%). One in five of those on free school meals had no access to a computer at home. Free school meal pupils did, however, receive more help from their parents or a family member than other children.
- The report does not find any significant differences in remote learning by ethnicity.

[The National Foundation for Education](#) published its report on pupil engagement in remote learning. The report is based on findings from a national survey of 1,233 senior leaders and 1,821 teachers in publicly-funded, mainstream primary and secondary schools in England. Responses between 7 and 17 May have been weighted by phase and free school meal (FSM) eligibility to provide a nationally representative picture. The report conveys teachers' concerns about relatively low levels of engagement of pupils and their parents, particularly pupils with limited access to IT and/or study space; vulnerable pupils; pupils with special educational needs and disabilities; pupils eligible for Pupil Premium funding; and young carers.

## Impact on services

### Scottish Evidence

The Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland project (University of Glasgow) is continuing to produce early insight papers. [This month's paper](#) covers learning from the **Children's Hubs**:

- **Speed of development:** Interviewees felt that the learning from the rapid set-up of the hubs offers a valuable opportunity to review processes but requires flexibility, space to innovate and capacity.
- **Creation of new collaborative ways of working:** Interviewees commented that COVID-19 had "forced the agenda" of joined up working and challenged silo ways of working. Consideration should be given to how these new ways of working can be sustained and built on as part of the planning for schools to return in August.
- **Implications for learning:** The focus of the hubs on childcare rather than learning has led to the design of creative solutions to engage the children and young people who attend. Interviewees stated that they had seen higher levels of engagement than expected from some children and young people. Consideration should be given to reviewing and learning from these approaches.
- **Looking outwards:** The activity in hubs has gone beyond the provision of childcare. Examples include designing PPE for NHS workers and creating community art for the local hospital. There is an opportunity to consider the design of the curriculum and where these new or different learning opportunities might be incorporated or replace those that may now be less relevant.

The aforementioned study by **CYCJ** reported some findings of relevance to **youth justice services**:

- **Requests of government from children and young people** included more financial help and reassurance for care experienced young people that police are there to ensure their safety and to support those whose care placements may be breaking down. A lack of information and uncertainty about the current situation was highlighted as an issue by respondents.
- The **impact of changes to the operation of the justice system** were mentioned by children and young people and practitioners. Some young people raised the impact of delays to court and Children's Hearings and on progression of plans (e.g. from custody) as an issue, which practitioners reported can cause stress and uncertainty. There was support from some practitioners for a move to more virtual hearings.
- Experiences of **remote service provision** are consistent with other studies: barriers include lack of technology and privacy at home, and the challenges of building new relationships.

- Services are using a **range of creative methods** including various technological platforms, to keep in touch but also to run fun activities and projects. This ability to provide light-hearted support has been identified as particularly important for young people's morale, wellbeing and mental health. Face-to-face contact (e.g. physically distanced walks) has been important for more isolated children and children where there are concerns for their welfare and wellbeing.
- The report highlights the need to be prepared for the **long-term impact of COVID-19 on mental health and wellbeing**. It was felt vital that practitioners maintain efforts to keep in touch with and support children, young people and their families and also equally important that children are supported to stay in touch with family and friends.
- The report includes a number of case studies of how services are responding to COVID-19 restrictions. This includes innovative uses of social media, digital access support, close partnership working (e.g. with community police), online staff tools, safe face-to-face contact (e.g. using hula hoops with young children, walks), getting young people involved in COVID-19 volunteer work, provision of COVID-19 packs and food parcels, and a range of fun and creative activities to keep children and young people engaged and staff morale up (e.g. competitions, quizzes, film clubs etc.).

The Justice Analytical Services (SG) report on domestic abuse referenced earlier (see 'Children and families impacted by domestic abuse' section) reports similar experiences - children's support services reported **challenges experienced around engaging with and supporting children remotely** by telephone or other digital platforms, particularly younger children. Engagement with women with children was sometimes reported as more difficult by services.

#### UK Evidence

**The UK Co-SPACE study** (referenced earlier) published a [supplementary report](#) on parenting support services which suggests that demand is highest for advice in managing children's emotions. Key findings are:

- **Only a quarter (24%) of Scottish respondents have accessed support** in relation to their child's response to COVID-19, isolation and relationships (this was similar to other regions).
- Advice from the internet, schools and specialist services was felt to be the most useful. Satisfaction with internet advice in Scotland/Wales/Northern Ireland (analysed together) was much higher than in England.
- Where parents (across the UK) have sought advice, this was most commonly in relation to **managing children or young people's emotions (77%)**, managing children or young people's behaviours

(47%) and managing children or young people's educational demands (41%).

- Parents were more likely to access support if their child or themselves had a pre-existing mental health condition and/or if they had received support pre-lockdown;
- There is some indication of demand for specialist services for parents of adolescents, and those who have a child with a pre-existing mental health condition. Parents of adolescents are more likely to seek advice on managing children's emotions and educational demands than parents of younger children. All this indicates that the **demand for mental health services is highest for young people**.
- The most popular people/organisations' advice that parents trust are universal services (school and health), followed by the third sector and family/friends. Trust in advice from Government scored much lower (21%).
- Trust is higher across most services by parents with primary aged children, compared to those with older children. There is some evidence that families with pre-existing mental health conditions are less trusting of advice.

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) published its report '[Covid-19 and early intervention: Evidence, challenges and risks relating to virtual and digital delivery](#)' in April which comprises a rapid evidence review and a short online survey of children's service providers and developers in England. The report focuses on five areas of children's outcomes - mental health and wellbeing; substance misuse; crime, violence and antisocial behaviour (including children's behavioural problems); risky sexual behaviour and teen pregnancy; and child maltreatment. Key findings from the report are:

- **Virtual and digital interventions can be effective** in improving outcomes for young people across a wide range of intervention types and outcome measures (though typically they are found to be equally or less effective than face-to-face) and can work and support service continuity in the current crisis. There are evidence-based programmes which already exist.
- In general, interventions which have some form of **personalisation, interactivity and/or contact with a practitioner** – rather than self-directed, non-interactive learning – are more likely to improve outcomes.
- In terms of achieving larger and more enduring effects, the evidence seems to be **stronger for interventions focusing on mental health and wellbeing** than for those focusing on substance misuse, risky sexual behaviour and teen pregnancy, or crime, violence and antisocial behaviour.
- Virtual and digital interventions often face **high levels of attrition**, where participants drop out or fail to complete the intervention.

- Further **challenges of digital service delivery** are digital access and barriers to participation (though many programmes are telephone-based), maintaining effectiveness when moving from a face-to-face to digital format (e.g. developing a trusted relationship), participant engagement (particularly getting vulnerable children and young people to engage with services), and individual preferences (some people are very reluctant to engage digitally).
- The evidence suggests that digital interventions should clearly identify the core components of an intervention that must be maintained in any adaptation from face-to-face to virtual and digital delivery.

The EIF has also produced an excellent [webinar](#) (12 May) on how services for children and families have been responding and adapting to the COVID-19 lockdown. This covers the findings of the report and interviews with local authorities and talks through evidence-based recommendations for services as they adapt to virtual and digital delivery modes. The EIF is supporting services to evaluate their adapted programmes and will be publishing a further report based on interviews with English local authorities about how COVID-19 has impacted on early intervention services.

## Learning from past pandemics and natural disasters

### Pandemic-related research findings

Many of the issues identified in COVID-19 surveys and emerging research echo those documented in historical pandemic literature. This suggests that some children and young people (in particular) and families in Scotland may be at heightened risk of adverse effects of the pandemic on their health and wellbeing.

- A systematic review<sup>6</sup> on the psychological impacts of quarantine in adults suggest that the psychological impact of quarantine is wide-ranging, substantial, and can be long lasting. There seems to be a fairly consistent pattern across studies and emerging COVID-19 evidence that **parents, especially women, are more vulnerable to stress and anxiety – particularly those with young children.**
- Research on **risk factors** for health and mental wellbeing of children during quarantine include prolonged duration, fears of infection, frustration and boredom, inadequate information, lack of in-person contact with classmates, friends, and teachers, lack of personal space at home, and family financial loss<sup>7</sup>.
- Research from China<sup>8</sup> earlier in the year suggested that the impact of prolonged school closure and home confinement may include social isolation, lengthened screen time, frustration and boredom, weight gain, and disrupted sleep cycles.
- There is emerging (international) evidence<sup>9</sup> that, as anticipated, some **adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)** are increasing during the current pandemic such as domestic abuse and parental mental health problems and substance abuse. Risk factors for ACEs can include race/ethnicity (though more so in the US than here), socioeconomic factors and social isolation – all known risk factors for negative impacts of this pandemic. Previous evidence suggests that child abuse tends to increase during times of recession. A recent study from the Kaiser Family Foundation highlighted an increase in risk for parental mental health and substance use problems as a result of school closures, social isolation, and job loss and income insecurity. Some of the children impacted by these experiences during the pandemic may also have limited access to sources of resilience and support which further increases their risk.

Young people, isolation and mental health risks

Emerging literature on the impact of COVID-19 suggests that adolescents' mental health may be particularly vulnerable during and after this pandemic, but further research is needed.

A systematic review on '*The Impact of Social Isolation and Loneliness on the Mental Health of Children and Adolescents in the Context of COVID-19*' was published in June<sup>10</sup>. The review draws on more than 60 peer-reviewed studies covering isolation, loneliness, and mental health for children and young people aged between 4 and 21.

- Only one study was conducted in an infectious diseases context; its findings suggest that quarantine disease control measures can lead to an increase in mental health problems and potential post-traumatic stress in children<sup>8</sup>.
- The review surmises that children and adolescents may be vulnerable to depression and anxiety during and after lockdown, and that this may increase as lockdown continues. That said, it also notes that it is difficult to predict the effect that COVID-19 will have on the mental health of children and young people, given the global nature of social isolation in this context (and usage of social media) which is arguably different from individual subjective experiences of isolation described in previous research.
- Young people who are lonely might be as much as three time more likely to develop depression in the future, and the impact of loneliness could last for up to nine years.
- There was some evidence that it's the duration of loneliness as opposed to the intensity of loneliness which seems to have the biggest impact on depression rates in young people. This suggests that the easing of lockdown measures should take full account of young people's need for social connection at the earliest opportunity.
- Mental health services should be prepared for an increase in mental health problems.

These concerns are echoed in another recent paper in *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*<sup>11</sup> that considers how physical distancing may have a disproportionate effect on adolescents for whom peer interaction is a vital aspect of healthy development. The paper explores how social deprivation in adolescence might have long-term consequences and considers how digital communication can enable social connection and might, therefore, mitigate the impact of physical distancing. The authors call for more information provided about the potential merits (and harms) of digital connection and for governments to address the digital divide.

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<sup>8</sup> See June Briefing for a description of this study.

## Insights from disasters literature

COVID-19 shares some of the characteristics of a natural disaster: it affects the community simultaneously which impacts on the availability of health and other services; people have less support than would normally be available when they experience a traumatic event; the event occurs quickly and can be unpredictable and uncontrollable (although the latter is arguably less pronounced for COVID-19 compared to events such as earthquakes)<sup>12</sup>. Evidence from previous disasters may therefore shed some light on potential impacts of the pandemic:

- Research on the **mental health impacts of natural disasters and terrorist incidents** on children suggests that they can suffer significant deterioration of their mental health and that **these effects can persist over the longer-term**<sup>13</sup>. Symptoms vary depending on factors such as the nature and severity of disaster, the diagnostic criteria used, and cultural differences in understandings of trauma. Effective interventions include counselling, CBT, brief trauma/grief-focused psychotherapy, and play therapy which can be given individually and in groups<sup>14</sup>.
- **It is not the case that young children are immune to the effects of disasters** (e.g. because they can't remember them or are too young to understand). Studies of earthquakes, hurricanes and 9/11 in the US have reported PTSD and developmental delays in young children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds<sup>15</sup>. Children exposed to severe disaster-related stress in utero have also been shown to be more likely to be born with low birth-weight, have lower cortisol levels, lower IQ scores, language difficulties, and lower school achievement<sup>16</sup>. This is consistent with wider biological evidence that stressful environments can affect pre-natal development and development after birth.
- Wider research has shown that the **risk factors for PTSD** in children who have experienced traumatic events (including in-utero exposure) include female gender, minority ethnicity and low socioeconomic status (SES), parent mental health problems, pre-existing mental health problems as well as the type, intensity, duration and the number of traumatic events<sup>17</sup>.
- **Outcomes** associated with PTSD in childhood include developmental delays, poorer physical health, mental health problems, suicide ideation and substance abuse; increased school absences, poor learning, memory and achievement; and impaired relationships with parents, siblings, peers and teachers<sup>18</sup>.

Example - A New Zealand study (2016)<sup>19</sup> on children starting school in the years after a series of earthquakes in Christchurch found that behavioural problems and post-traumatic stress symptoms were significantly higher in children in the post-earthquake group than children in the control (pre-earthquake) group. The 300 children in the study (including those who were in utero at the time of the earthquake) were five times more likely to exhibit symptoms of PTSD than other New Zealand children. Eighty per cent had at least one symptom and a third exhibited at least six of 12 symptoms. About a third had eight or more behavioural problems<sup>20</sup>. The study also found that children who were younger (<2) at the beginning of the earthquake period were significantly more likely to have higher behaviour problem and PTS scores than the pre-earthquake control group and older age groups in the post-earthquake groups. This suggests that **very young children are more at risk of mental health impacts of significant natural disasters** than older children<sup>9</sup>.

The question is whether the COVID-19 pandemic and associated disease control measures are equivalent to other natural (or otherwise) disasters and therefore pose the same level of risk to children's mental wellbeing. It will be crucial to track the impact of the pandemic on children and families in the short, medium and longer term, and to pay particular attention to those families and children with new or previous experience of adversity, trauma, disadvantage or discrimination.

## Mitigating the impact of pandemics and disasters

Disasters and pandemic research<sup>21,22, 23,24</sup> suggests that the following factors are important for protecting the wellbeing of children and young people:

### Information and messaging

- Providing age-appropriate information and prioritising communication with children about COVID-19. Listening to what children believe about COVID-19 transmission; providing children with an accurate explanation that is meaningful to them will ensure that they do not feel unnecessarily frightened or guilty.

### Parental advice and support

- Education and advice for parents to ensure that children are given age-appropriate, honest information at home.
- Good parenting skills are essential with an emphasis on fostering safe, stable and nurturing relationships between children and their caregivers,

<sup>9</sup> This led to the "Reducing Stress in Schools" project which included 17 evidence-based interventions for reducing stress in schools e.g. calm down classroom décor and wall colours and 'play eat learn' schedules where children have recess before they eat lunch. Strategies to address the problem suggested by Liberty and Allan achieved a 27 per cent decrease in behavioural issues.

and maintaining close and open communication to enable early identification of issues.

- Social work and other services to provide a 'social safety net' to help parents cope in the absence of their usual support networks.

#### Service response and recovery

- Child and mental health services should take into account the uniqueness of each disaster/event as the actions required will vary depending on the context;
- The direct engagement of children and young people is key to minimise reporting bias by parents who may struggle recognising symptoms in their children;
- The review described above recommends that targeted efforts are made to mitigate loneliness in adolescents, and that mental health services should offer preventative support and early intervention.<sup>25</sup>
- Joined up support services, ideally with a single point of contact (e.g. schools), to identify and screen those most vulnerable (using validated tools) for risk and mental health problems, and refer to relevant services.
- Recovery should take a holistic approach that includes social, school and family systems in order to achieve sustainable recovery. Attention should be given to teachers' distress, teacher–pupil relationships, and peer relationships in the school system, as well as to parents' distress, parent–child relationships, and the marital relationship in the family system.

#### Specialist support

- Specialist care is not usually required at early stages - instead widespread psychological first aid that focuses on psycho-education about normative reactions and coping strategies is recommended. Most children exposed to traumatic events develop fleeting psychological responses, which, although distressing, are normal. Mental health service responses should include different levels of interventions moving from universal/low-intensity interventions to specialist/ high-intensity ones [e.g. a [trauma-informed approach](#)].
- Some commentators recommend early and effective trauma screening for all children and trauma-focused cognitive-behavioural therapy for those that need it<sup>26</sup>.
- The provision of online evidence-based psychological services can help children and young people cope with issues such as health anxiety and family conflict.
- There is emerging evidence about the efficacy of trauma-focused cognitive–behavioural principles in early treatment for PTSD in trauma-exposed child. However, there are also concerns that certain types of

early interventions (debriefing) may have harmful effects, presumably by promoting the consolidation of trauma memories.

- Other effective interventions include counselling, CBT, brief trauma/grief-focused psychotherapy, and play therapy which can be given individually and in groups.

## New and forthcoming studies

### New children and young people COVID-19 surveys (general)

**Public Health Scotland** launched its COVID-19 Early Years Resilience and Impact Survey on 22 June. The survey asks parents and carers of children aged 2-7 about their experiences of life at home during the COVID-19 pandemic and how this may have affected the health and wellbeing of their family. The survey closes 6 July.

[The Children's Parliament](#) re-ran its survey for the third time in June. The survey looks at changes in wellbeing across a number of domains including learning and activities; access to information, expressing opinions and experiencing rights; health; and family and friends. Findings are anticipated mid-late July.

There are a number of UK studies and research activities focusing on primary-age children which will hopefully report soon. These include:

- [Barnardo's Big Conversation COVID-19 survey](#) for children aged 8-15 (now closed)
- [Edge Hill's University COVID-19 survey](#) for children aged 7-12 and parents which is focusing on information and messaging for children. (now closed)
- Primary School Network Wales [HAPPEN at home survey](#) for children aged 8-11 (now closed).

### New research with children and families with vulnerabilities

[CELCIS](#) in partnership with the CYCJ (University of Strathclyde) is running an online survey for young people (aged 12-17) and adults (18+) to understand the views and experiences of people who have participated in, or wanted to participate in, a **Children's Hearing in Scotland** during COVID-19. They would like to hear from young people, families, panel members, social workers, safeguarders, reporters, solicitors, advocacy workers, and anyone else involved.

[Inclusion](#) is running a survey for disabled people who are **shielding**. Whilst not specific to children and families, it may provide some useful context on how shielding households are responding to the easing of lockdown measures. The survey closes 29 June.

[Research in Practice and TACT](#) (The Adolescent and Children's Trust) is running three linked surveys for **young people in care, carers and birth families** to explore their experiences of life at home during lockdown. The surveys aim to explore how people have spent their time, experiences of home schooling and relationships with social care over the lockdown period. The surveys are running 9 – 21 June.

[REACH \(Resilience, Ethnicity and AdolesCent mental Health\)](#) (King's College London) is an ongoing 5 year study of adolescent mental health in inner-city London schools which aims to understand the extent and nature of mental health problems among **diverse groups**, what factors increase and decrease the risk of problems, and why. The next wave of data collection is being tailored to examine the impact of the pandemic on young people from diverse backgrounds, with plans to repeat in 6 and 18 months' time.

There are a number of ongoing studies investigating the COVID-19 experience of children and young people with cancer and other serious and long-term **health conditions**:

- University of Southampton and University of York's [SHARE Study](#). It involves a survey for parents with children with cancer and young people aged 12-25 with cancer. This survey is also being targeted at parents of children with hydrocephalus (SHARE Hydrocephalus Study) and parents of children with chronic kidney disease and congenital heart disease (both surveys now closed).
- [CLIC Sargent coronavirus survey](#) – this is a short survey (now closed) aimed at young people with cancer and parents, looking at the impact of coronavirus on issues like food, finances and wellbeing.

## Notes and further information

This briefing is intended for information and awareness on current and emerging evidence on the impacts of COVID-19 on children and young people, in particular those with vulnerabilities. It is not an exhaustive overview or a critical appraisal or endorsement of the quality of research included.

**Children & Families Analysis, Scottish Government**

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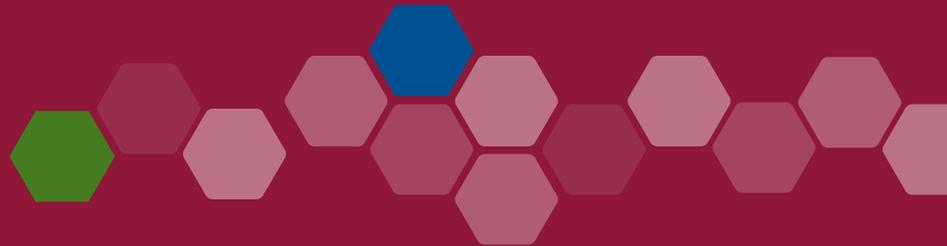
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