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ABSTRACT

The UK has been one of the most badly affected nations of the Global North by the COVID-19 outbreak in terms of illness, death rates and a severe economic downturn. Children have been impacted severely (and unequally), with UK lockdown meaning that many children were away from school and usual leisure activities for six months during the first lockdown. We revised this Viewpoint during the third lockdown when schools were closed again for an indefinite time. Despite substantial media and policy debate about the impact of COVID-19 on young people, with a focus on education, young people's own voices tend to be obscured in these mainstream accounts. By contrast, the Children's Commissioner for England has focused on young people's accounts, which are discussed in this viewpoint.

Introduction

> We have to stay at home because of the virus. It's home learning every day. I see my friends on Zoom, like daddy has his work meetings. I like being at home because I can play with my cat. (Michael, aged 5, Children's Commissioner Lockdown Experiences, 2020)
> Most families are enjoying being at home 24/7 as it means they can spend quality family time together but for someone like me being 'locked in' with my mum is probably my worst nightmare. Caring for a parent with mental illness can be draining at the best of time let alone not getting the opportunity for some time out for example. For me school was an escapism so simply it allows me to act my age, Covid19 has taken that away from me. (Alicia, 17, Children's Commissioner Lockdown Experiences, 2020)

The Covid-19 pandemic, as the quotes from children above illustrate, is experienced differentially within UK. As Michael says the lockdown that was enforced in the UK as a result of the pandemic can have a positive impact on children's relationships in their families. But for other children, like Alicia, living with a parent with mental ill-health can be a 'nightmare'. The UK,[1] by comparison with other nations of the Minority World/Global North, has been particularly badly affected by COVID-19. The UK has the highest number of deaths from Covid-19 in Europe, whether measured by excess mortality or deaths linked to COVID-19 (ONS 2020). When we wrote this viewpoint in July the UK had the 7th highest death rate per 100,000 population globally and the second highest in Europe after the tiny state of San Marino (John Hopkins University 2020). When revising the viewpoint (December 2020–January 2021) the UK had the third highest deathrate per 100,000 population in the world – notwithstanding that these official figures might not capture illness and death from Covid-19 in contexts with limited health care and testing. The UK Office for National Statistics has assessed that gross domestic product (GDP) decreased by 20.4% in the second quarter

of the year following a dip of 2.2% during the first three months of 2020, making the UK statistically the most negatively economically affected member of the Organisations of Economically Developed Countries. As in other countries there is 'considerably lower burden of morbidity and mortality' (RCPCH 2020) on children and young people, and therefore media and policy debates about COVID have focused on indirect impacts of COVID-19, notably the long lockdown and school closures. Other issues that children have faced, such as bereavement and increases in child poverty and hunger have been less extensively covered.

The impacts of the pandemic on children are acute, with UK children living through one of the most long-lasting lockdowns globally. They were away from school for up to six months in the first lockdown, two months in the second and exam arrangements were in chaos. They experienced all of the social and economic collateral impacts of COVID-19, including a stark economic downturn with associated job losses, financial strain, and food insecurity amongst the poorest and most vulnerable groups. Although there has been considerable media and policy debate and discussion about the effect of lockdown and COVID-19 more generally on children (with a focus on education), there are limited accounts that foreground the voices of children themselves. This viewpoint sets out some of the context and impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, with particular regard to children, utilising secondary analysis of newspaper articles and news reports from a range or sources (*The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *Times*, *Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, the *BBC News* website, and the *Sky News* website). It then draws from conversations and blogs commissioned by the *Children's Commissioner* for England with a diversity of children to reflect upon their diverse experiences.

COVID in the UK -why was the UK so badly affected?

For international readers there may be many questions as to why the UK, a 'more economically developed' nation with an enviable free national health service, first class infrastructure, clean water, predominantly formal economy, ready access to plentiful quality food, and so on, has been so badly affected by COVID-19 in relation to both death rates and the substantial economic downturn. The impact of COVID in the UK has to be viewed within the context of ten years of Austerity, a populist government, and the stresses on the economy and instability caused by the UK's departure from the European Union. The Covid-19 pandemic has intensified existing problems that impact on children and particularly on those living in poverty. For example, the incidence of child malnutrition in England has doubled in the last six months (Townsend 2020). The impacts and approaches to COVID-19 have differed across the devolved nations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Within this context, the English government took a laissez faire approach initially, responding very slowly to the accelerating global mobility of the virus and offering confusing and inconsistent advice.

The government's initial response was to adopt a position of minimal intervention with the hope that the UK would attain 'herd immunity'. Although herd immunity being an element of government 'policy' was later disputed by the Health Secretary in the face of subsequent criticism, comments made by the Prime Minister and the Chief Scientific Advisor Patrick Vallance, on 12th and 13th March provide evidence to the contrary. The UK prime minister, Boris Johnson, who went on to contract the disease and require treatment in intensive care, said on 12th March: 'It is going to spread further, and I must level with you, I must level with the British public: many more families are going to lose loved ones before their time'. The Chief Scientific Advisor Patrick Vallance said:

> 'Communities will become immune to it and that's going to be an important part of controlling this longer term,' he said. 'About 60 per cent is the sort of figure you need to get herd immunity.' … 'Our aim is to try to reduce the peak, broaden the peak, not suppress it completely; also, because the vast majority of people get a mild illness, to build up some kind of herd immunity so more people are immune to this disease and we reduce the transmission, at the same time we protect those who are most vulnerable to it.' (Parker, Picard, and Hughes 2020)

At that time the government allowed schools, shops, restaurants and workplaces to remaibn open, imposed light border restrictions, and large public events were allowed to take place. As he spoke, the Cheltenham Festival, a horse racing event, was attracting around 60,000 people on each of its four days – there was a significant local spike in COVID-19 cases and deaths shortly after. Indeed, it has been widely modelled that the UK could have saved up to 75% of lives lost to COVID with an earlier first lockdown (Donnelly 2020). This pattern of slow reactions, confused guidance and a lack of rigorous quarantine policies has continued throughout the pandemic. Despite identifying a new, more virulent (and deadly) strain of the virus in October 2020 (where in districts of Kent the rate of Covid-19 per 100,000 was over 600 according to publicly available ONS figures, compared to the approximatley 150 per 100,000 which led to Leicester's local lockdown) the English government persisted in a light-touch tier system and were planning to permit household mixing of up to three households over five days during the Christmas period. This was despite the Independent (non-governmental) Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) emphasising that this mixing could 'double' infection rates (O'Dowd 2020), whilst the government's SAGE group emphasised meeting outside where possible and the importance of social distancing. Importantly SAGE highlighted that just because you can mix up to three households does not mean that you should (Sky News 2020). A late U-turn on 22nd December saw households in London and the Southeast told not to mix and non-essential shops closed. Families in those parts of England with lighter restrictions were advised to bring together up to three households for Christmas day only. In January England and devolved UK nations entered full lockdown again with deathrates and infection rates at the highest levels witnessed throughout the pandemic. Nonetheless, the rules are somewhat more relaxed than in the first lockdown, with larger numbers of people allowed to go to work and more groups considered essential workers, allowing them to request a school place for their children.

Lockdown – six months of missed schooling for most children and young people – and its disproportionate effects

Four days later on 17th March, the government changed their 'herd immunity' approach. This followed criticism from the World Health Organisation and the publication of a report by Imperial College London, which concluded that the government's approach of mitigation and minimal intervention would lead to 'hundreds of thousands of deaths and health systems being overwhelmed' (Ferguson et al. 2020, 1). The government announced a lockdown, similar to that adopted in other badly affected countries, including school closures (to all but a small number of children) from 23rd March. Lockdown measures included closing all leisure facilities, pubs, restaurants, non-essential shops, furloughed leave for non-essential workers, and asking people who to work from home if possible, unless they were 'essential key workers' (from bus drivers to NHS staff and carers for the elderly and disabled people). People were not allowed to mix socially outside of their household, including with close family members. Daily exercise outside was permitted (with an hour recommended but not enforced in England), and even encouraged.

Lockdown was enforced by law, with fines issued for those breaking lockdown – including by sunbathing in parks away from other people. In London, parks were closed in densely populated and poor neighbourhoods. Lockdown caused significant challenges for all families. The effect of lockdown has been deeply unequal in British society, however, reinforcing and exacerbating existing divides. People from ethnic minorities have been disproportionately fined for breaking lockdown, subject to higher mortality rates from the disease, and less likely to have access to green space in which to undertake their daily exercise safely. A domestic violence pandemic has ensued, disproportionately affecting families living in overcrowded situations. Death rates from the disease have been highest in the most deprived neighbourhoods. Clearly, the tensions associated with the additional caring responsibilities both close at hand and at a distance are intensified for those without access to a garden, who were most likely to live in urban areas, in some of which parks were closed down.

Much debate about the impact of lockdown on children and young people has focused on school closures, and there was much concern that these places for the education, socialisation and containment of children were closed for such a long period. Prime Minister Boris Johnson identified opening schools and keeping them open as a 'national priority' and a 'moral duty'.

During the first lockdown, schools remained open for the children of 'essential workers' and 'for those children who absolutely need to attend' (Cabinet Office and Department for Education 2020). The list of eligible parents/carers included food distribution/retail workers as well as healthcare and public service workers. Those children 'who absolutely need[ed] to attend' included those with Educational and Health Care Plans for their Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and 'vulnerable children' and young people on the child protection register (i.e. children in families with intervention for abuse and neglect). Given years of Austerity, many families in need of support are not on the child protection register. Teaching unions in the UK, however, called for only those in absolute need to send their children to school. The policy was interpreted in different ways in different Local Authority areas and between schools, with some asking for evidence that both parents are key workers, rather than one as the policy advises. At the height of lockdown, some schools struggled to cope with the children that attended, especially in maintaining social distancing for young children (Richardson and Sellgren 2020); eventually policy shifted to accommodate the fact that social distancing is not appropriate for younger children.

From 1st June, the government intended that schools should reopen for children in selected years aligned to a new approach, which moved from 'stay home, protect the NHS, safe lives' to 'stay alert, control the virus, and … save lives'. Since the accompanying 'track and trace' system was not functioning on 1st June (and was still not fully functioning in September), school reopening has been patchy, with some schools and Local Authority areas deciding not to reopen to the specified year groups. The majority of children remained at home, with varying experiences of home-schooling, from March until September, when schools reopened, and sending children back to school was both compulsory and enforceable. The government offered some support and a range of subject specific resources for home-schooling (Department for Education 2020a) as well as guidance on safeguarding including maintaining online safety (Department for Education 2020b). There is advice from The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service on co-parenting and on keeping in touch with family and friends during lockdown (Cafcass 2020). The UK government has permitted children in England, whose parents are living separately, to move freely between parents.

On the same day the UK education secretary announced the closure of schools (Department for Education and Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP 2020), it was announced that exams scheduled for children aged 16 (GCSE) and in in the final year of school ('A' Level) in summer 2020, were cancelled (Williamson 2020). The education secretary made a statement to the UK Parliament on 23rd March in which he explained that grades would be awarded based on a 'calculated grade to each student which reflects their performance as fairly as possible'. The awards were to be based on an algorithm that calculated a grade based on teacher predictions, teacher ranking of students and the past performance of the school in the particular subject. The result was that a large number of teacher predictions were downgraded with pupils from 'disadvantaged backgrounds' more likely to be downgraded and pupils attending private schools being twice as likely to achieve a top grade (Adams and McIntyre 2020). The outcry that followed included a number of protests organised by school students. The government then scrapped the algorithm and calculated grades and reverted to teacher predictions in a dramatic U-turn, but one that was too late for many pupils who had already lost their place at university. The education secretary said he was 'incredibly sorry for exams unfairness' (BBC 2020).

From the outset, there have been concerns about the impacts of lockdown on children. For instance, the Children's Society (2020) highlighted the impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing. The Children's Commissioner for England has, since the onset of Lockdown, emphasised the potential inequalities of experience for different groups of children, with lockdown and home schooling exacerbating existing inequalities for those in poorer, less educated, and ethnic

minority families and those in overcrowded situations, in temporary accommodation or with families with mental ill-health or drug and alcohol addictions.

There is a significant and persistent attainment gap in education experienced by children who are disadvantaged in the UK as in other wealthy yet unequal societies, such as the USA (Ball 2017). The gap between the attainment of those from more affluent and poorer background increases over the summer vacation. Stewart, Watson, and Campbell (2018) examined the underlying causes of this pattern and suggest that inequalities in opportunity for quality activities and childcare, along with the issue of food insecurity are key. They go further to suggest that the issue of the increasing gap over the summer vacation is arguably one key reason underpinning the persistent education gap between more advantaged and less advantaged groups in terms of social class and ethnic and racial background. Extrapolating from the fact that disadvantaged children fall further behind in education during long breaks, the Children's Commissioner for England has been vociferous in raising her concerns and identifying a real risk that those from disadvantaged backgrounds will fall further behind in education:

> Disadvantaged children, already behind in terms of attainment, slip further behind during school holidays. It has previously been found that summer holidays already account for as much as two thirds of the attainment gap between rich and poor children at age 14. The implication is clear that keeping schools closed will worsen social mobility, and the future costs to the education system of attempting to rectify this may also be substantial. (Longfield, Children's Commissioner for England, 2020)

Indeed, a study by the Institute of Fiscal studies has highlighted significant disparities in support for home learning between more affluent and poorer households (Andrew et al. 2020)

Lockdown has led to an epidemic of domestic violence globally and within the UK context (Townsend 2020), including child abuse and neglect. Although conflict in families cross-cuts social differences, it is intensified in families with pre-existing mental health issues, in overcrowded situations or where economic hardship leads to stress (Usher et al. 2020). Former Home Secretary, Sajid Javid (2020) raises specific concerns about child intra-familial child abuse and neglect, where: 'children are left to isolate alongside their abuser'. The Institute for Public Policy think tank estimates that an additional 200,000 children have been pushed into poverty as a result of the pandemic and associated restrictions, in addition to the 4.2 million children – 'roughly 9 children in a typical classroom of 30 who were in poverty pre-Covid' (Penington 2020). 2.4 million young people (17%) were living in food insecure households in May 2020 in the UK, according to a survey commissioned by the Food Foundation (Food Foundation 2020). Footballer Marcus Rashford spearheaded a campaign to ensure that children received food during lockdown and, later, throughout the school holidays.

Children and young people's experiences of the impacts of COVID-19

The Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, is dedicated to foregrounding voices and experiences of young people in general, and during lockdown and the aftermath specifically. A series of Children's Commissioner for England webpages are dedicated to children's lockdown experiences. The case-studies presented focus on childrenwho have particular challenges during lockdown – young carers, those in foster care and those with Autism, for instance (Children's Commissioner, 2020). In addition, the pages include four stories of life during lockdown from Michael (aged 5) and Indie (aged 14), Laura (aged 11) and Nic (aged 11) (Names changed), and stories about what children are planning as Lockdown is eased. This final section introduces some of the voices of the young people, highlighting the rich potential for future research into children and young people's experiences of lockdown.

> I would just like to express my feelings on schools closing. Due to school closing I'm missing out on a huge chunk of education that can prepare me for secondary school and later life. That makes me feel unprepared and not ready for the journey ahead. Moreover, I will be missing out on end of year events, some I've been waiting for since nursery. Despite doing the same subjects, I miss a sense of structure in my life. I miss

socialising with my friends and laughing with them. Fortunately for me I am able to see them on FaceTime but not all children are lucky enough to be able to FaceTime their friends. Although I do enjoy the time with my family, I miss my school life as well. (Laura)

I first went into lockdown the Tuesday before schools closed. I felt happy because I didn't have to do school stuff, but I hate learning from home because it's boring and we have already done lots of it at school. Some of the things I've been doing while I've been off school are watching the whole of Netflix and every TikTok that lives. I have learnt new skills like cooking, but I'm not keeping very active (right now I'm on spring break though). I really wanted to do SATs because my whole time at primary school was leading up to that. I do miss things about school, like my friends, my teacher and my counsellor at school. The best things about the lockdown are I can eat as much as I want, I get to see my mum and dad and I can stay in bed longer. The worst things about the lockdown are no friends, not having siblings so I'm lonely and having to hear my dog bark all day. I'm getting on good with my parents I guess, but sometimes we argue. I'm staying in touch with my friends with texts, WhatsApp and FT (FaceTime). I am spending more time than normal on my phone and on screen-time. I think schools should go back soon. If they do go back, then I'll be most excited about the Year Six Leavers Party! (Nic)

These two quotes speak volumes about the anxieties and difficulties of life under lockdown (about school, missing or being unprepared for key transitions and socialising), along with some of the benefits of lockdown as expressed by Nic – seeing family, staying in bed longer and eating, along with learning new skills. Laura alludes to some of the inequalities between children during lockdown, emphasising how she appreciates being able to use technology to connect with her friends. Laura articulates the injustice that is revealed through the Covid-19 pandemic, as illuminated also in one of our opening quotes from Alicia.

Robyn (16, who has Autism) highlights her frustrations at losing her social life, and also the importance of fresh air and exercise to wellbeing.

I call my friends every day, it's so hard. We'd be out every day, but we can't now. I'm out socialising, but we would have had a sleep over, I'm bored and fed up, I've lost my social life.

I don't even know what to do with myself anymore. Walking the dog keeps me sane and lets me breathe fresh air.

Conclusion

These varied experiences, which contrast with dominant discourses of childhood, in the Covid-19 pandemic, reveal the first-hand experience of children in lockdown. They are accounts that highlight wider issues that are of paramount importance in coping with the pandemic and moving forward in the pandemic's aftermath. We have shown here that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and young people in the UK has been acute and uneven. The UK government's handling of issues, particularly around school closures and exams, has created injustice for children, which has exacerbated and laid bare existing inequalities and hardships that might be shocking to an international audience given the relative wealth and affluence of the UK. This injustice is starkly evident in children's own accounts. We suggest that it is critical, for a fuller understanding and in order to recognise and challenge injustice, that children are included in research on Covid-19 and that we look beyond the normative associations of childhood and school to understand a range of experiences. As we are experiencing the third lockdown and the second period of school closure (and first-hand the pressures of home-schooling), we urge that the debate focuses on factors beyond the narrow educational parameters of school to reflect upon how in a wealthy nation such as the UK we can have such a patchy and inadequate response to Covid-19 alongside such endemic and shocking poverty and inequalities, which has impacts which are simultaneously generational and differentiated.

Note

1. The UK consists of four devolved nations – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The authors reside within England, and therefore the discussion is focused on the context of England, although some

statistics and policies are relevant at the level of the UK. There is significant political difference between the four nations of the UK, and the pattern of COVID-19 has differed between the four nations, and this has been expressed at times by divergent policies. For instance, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland locked down earlier within the pandemic wave; Scotland had lower levels of COVID-19 and deaths per capita (Marshall 2020).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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