



COVID-19 crisis and children's economic well-being, education and mental health in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland

Online workshop of the Interdisciplinary Child Well-Being Network (ICWBN), 8 September 2021

Session 1: Economic well-being (Chair: Kat Chzhen)

Covid Realities: Reflections from researching with families living on a low income during the pandemic (*Jim Kaufman, University of York*)

The centrepiece of the Covid Realities research programme is participatory work with parents and carers living on a low income during the pandemic. Through online diary entries and written responses to 'big questions of the week' over 100 parents and carers from across the UK have been sharing their experiences of everyday life in an extraordinary time. In addition, monthly 'Big Ideas' virtual discussion groups have brought parents together to discuss ideas for change, and to co-produce policy recommendations. This paper outlines some of the difficulties faced by low-income families during the pandemic, and describes their experiences of seeking support from the social security system. Too often the social security system has itself been a source of additional uncertainty, stigma, and worry for low income families. The paper then turns to reflect on the Covid Realities research process. This is one which actively seeks to create opportunities for involvement and intervention by participants. This is less about trying to influence 'hearts and minds' than it is about trying to find ways of giving otherwise marginalised forms of knowledge and expertise greater influence and air time. This space is highly valued by the participants, who are motivated by what they see as an urgent need for policy action, and the sense of strength and solidarity they gain from coming together. The paper concludes by outlining the participants' vision and agenda for change, and directions for future research.

Growing Up in Ireland: Key findings from the special COVID-19 survey (*Aisling Murray, ESRI*)

In December 2020, the Growing Up in Ireland study conducted a special COVID survey of both its cohorts. At the time, the study children of Cohort '08 would have been around 12 years old; both they and their primary caregiver completed individual online surveys. The young adults of Cohort '98 were mostly aged 22 years and they also completed a survey online. The surveys were short and focused on the contemporary experience of the pandemic including

changes in activities and employment, resources for home learning, and self-reported exposure to the virus. The initial findings showed considerable variation in the pandemic experiences of individuals. For example, the experience of being laid off was much more common for the 22-year-olds of Cohort '98 than the older adults who were the parents of Cohort '08. Differences between groups in the same cohort were examined using pre-pandemic measures of socio-demographic characteristics including income. In general, where income differences emerged, these tended to favour the highest income quintile over those with the lowest income (pre-pandemic). This suggests that the impact of the pandemic is likely to reflect pre-existing inequalities.

Socio-Economic impact of Covid-19 pandemic on children and families living in disadvantaged communities of Tallaght, Ireland (*Jefrey Shumba, Childhood Development Initiative*)

The Covid-19 pandemic brought with it widespread changes to lives globally and was characterised by widespread lockdowns, closure of services, schools and child-care services and job losses. This study was conducted as part of a larger study, which examined multidimensional child poverty in children and families in Tallaght. The current study explored the socio-economic impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on children and families in Tallaght, Ireland. We conducted focus group discussions with children (six focus group discussions), parents (two focus group discussions) and service providers (two focus group discussions). Participants were prompted to discuss how the Covid-19 pandemic had affected children and families and insightful perspectives, rich experiences and reflections were shared in focus group discussions. Our findings indicate that children's education and parents' training were severely affected during the Covid-19 pandemic as some families could not afford to access the required Information and Technology equipment for online education and training. Food poverty emerged as a huge concern for some families during the pandemic. Children's outdoor play time and interactions with their peers was severely impacted and reported being depressed, worried, anxious and having behavioural difficulties, all related to the Covid-19 pandemic. A Covid Recovery plan, which guarantees access to education for all children is required and a commitment to measures to address the emerging impacts of the pandemic. Children should be guaranteed access to a daily nutritious meal and support systems to enable children to recover their socio-emotional well-being should be implemented. The replacement for the national children's strategy (Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures) should be developed through consultation as a matter of urgency.

Generation Pandemic; The Frontline Perspective - an uncovering of the lived experiences of children and young people experiencing disadvantage in Ireland throughout Covid-19 (*Sarah Edmonds, Irish Youth Foundation*)

For children and young people experiencing disadvantage in Ireland, life was already challenging pre Covid-19. Fast forward 18 months and we are only now beginning to understand the toll the pandemic has taken on their young lives. To get beyond the daily statistics and uncover the truth of the lived reality, we've spoken to young people affected to hear about their experiences. The young people we're calling 'Generation Pandemic'. We've also spoken to the unsung heroes on the frontline; over 300 youth workers that represent

over 35,000 young people nationwide. They understand these young people's lived realities and are often the 'one good adult' in a young person's life, working tirelessly to support them across villages, cities and towns in Ireland. Many young people have socially regressed, fallen behind in education, and their employment prospects have been shattered. However, this report is not just about the untold suffering of the country's most at-risk children and young people. It also focuses on the immediate actions we can take to undo the catastrophic damage that has been caused. We have created a clear set of tangible solutions with the frontline heroes who have the skills, experience and infrastructures in place in communities across Ireland and are ready to start turning things around.

Session 2: Education (Chair: Julia Mikolai)

Children's learning experiences over the course of the pandemic in England (*Adam Salisbury, IFS*)

The COVID-19 pandemic has dealt a monumental blow to the education of English school children. In this paper, we document how children fared during the first 12 months of disruption, using data from two online surveys fielded to parents during both the first and second nationwide school closures. We document how children's learning experiences differed between both rounds of closures, as well as potential drivers of these differences. We also analyse how children fared during the 2020 Autumn term, when schools were open but periodically disrupted by localised COVID-19 cases. Finally, we examine how learning inequalities have evolved throughout the pandemic, including documenting initial inequalities in the provision of and access to catch-up tuition.

Coping with UK school closures: the changing responses of schools, parents and children during COVID-19 (*Birgitta Rabe, University of Essex*)

We study inequalities in learning inputs during the two periods of school closures in the UK, focusing on the inputs into children's learning by schools, parents, and the children themselves. Based on data from the Understanding Society COVID-19 survey we consider how schools, parents and children responded to the switch to distance learning, how this differed by family background, and how parents and children engaged with the provision of learning materials and lessons by schools. The number of online lessons and offline learning materials provided by schools did not significantly differ by school characteristics or the composition of the pupil intake in either closure period. Schools considerably improved their distance learning provision between the first and second period of school closures. During the first closure period, many families used freely available additional learning materials not provided by schools, and this did not differ much across families with different socio-economic backgrounds. Children's time spent on schoolwork was lower in disadvantaged families, but parental time spent on home schooling did not differ by indicators of socio-economic background. The increased offer of online and offline lessons by schools resulted in more time spent by children and parents of primary school children on home schooling. In particular, the provision of on-line lessons had an equalizing effect: it reduced differences in

the time primary school children from different socio-economic backgrounds spent on schoolwork, and in secondary schools reduced gender differences in students' study time.

Children's engagement with remote schooling during the Spring 2020 lockdown in Ireland

(Kat Chzhen, Trinity College Dublin)

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the greatest disruption to children's schooling in generations. The present study contributes to the literature on inequalities in children's schooling during the pandemic by analyzing primary school children's emotional engagement with remote schooling during the Spring 2020 lockdown in the Republic of Ireland. It investigates whether children's engagement with their remote schooling varied by personal and family characteristics, using data from the Children's School Lives (CSL) surveys. CSL is a nationally representative study of primary schools in Ireland, which collected information from children aged 8-9 years in May – August 2019 (Wave 1) and in May - July 2020 (Wave 2). Linear regression estimates with school fixed effects are based on the analytic sample of nearly 400 children (from across 71 schools) who took part in both waves and have complete data on all the key variables. Emotional engagement with remote schooling is measured using five child-reported items on satisfaction with schooling collected in Wave 2. Children with greater resources for home schooling reported higher levels of engagement. This includes having a computer or a laptop for schoolwork, rather than a tablet or a smartphone, and having someone to help with schoolwork if the child is worried about falling behind. This points to the paramount importance of adequate digital technologies in the home as well as the availability of help (whether from parents, other family members or the school).

Session 3: Mental health (Chair: Jennifer Symonds)

The COVID-19 crisis and children's mental health in the UK *(Julia Mikolai, University of St Andrews)*

Changes in children's mental health and well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic have received a lot of attention in the media and popular press. Early evidence shows that indeed, children's mental health has deteriorated during the pandemic. Some studies found that this has partly been a result of school closures. However, little, if anything at all, is known about the influence of children's family environment on their well-being during the pandemic. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on children's most immediate environment: their families. More specifically, we study whether and how changes in families' social and economic circumstances have influenced child mental health and whether these changes have been the same for children who lived in two-parent versus single mother families. Using combined data from the annual and COVID waves of the Understanding Society study, we analyse the association between family structure and child mental health (measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) controlling for a range of important socio-economic factors. We find that children of single mothers have worse mental health than children in couple-parent families. However, housing tenure explains away this association: children in private/social renting fare worse than those whose parents own their home. Additionally, mother's mental health is a strong and significant predictor of child SDQ scores;

worse mental health is associated with higher SDQ scores. Taken together, this study shows persistent socio-economic differences in children's experiences during the COVID pandemic.

Tracking children, young people, and parents' mental health throughout the pandemic: Findings from the UK Co-SPACE study and how we are responding to them (*Cathy Creswell, University of Oxford*)

The [Co-SPACE survey](#) has been tracking children and young people (4-16 years) and parent/carer's mental health since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. Parents/carers and young people (11-16 years) from across the UK have completed monthly surveys which have allowed us to monitor how mental health symptoms have changed over time throughout the pandemic, and how patterns have varied according to particular child/family characteristics and circumstances. We have also obtained a more in depth understanding of some of the findings through follow-up qualitative interviews. In this talk I will give an overview of key [findings](#) to date and will introduce further projects that have been launched in response to Co-SPACE findings, in particular two randomised controlled trials that are evaluating accessible remote support for parents and carers to address every day parenting challenges among community populations ([SPARKLE](#)) and to overcome anxiety problems within child mental health settings ([CoCAT](#)).

The mental health and wellbeing of young people and their families during COVID-19: Key findings from Co-SPACE Ireland (*Jennifer McMahon, University of Limerick*)

The aim of the CoSPACE Ireland study is to describe how parents and their children dealt with the rapid and significant changes to their lives during COVID-19 and how this correlated with their mental health. In April/May of 2020 more than 1800 Irish parents, of children and adolescents, completed a cross-sectional survey that explored a range of variables and measures of child and parent mental health, with some of these families being tracked at various points throughout the pandemic. As well as highlighting key study findings and outlining current phases of the study, this paper will present [published findings](#) from the cross-sectional survey completed by 797 parents of children from 4 -12 years, ($M = 9$ years). School variables explored included school expectations for schoolwork, how much time per day spent on schoolwork, how able parents were to support their child with schoolwork, whether a child had support from an adult at school and whether the child had support from a friend. Child mental health was measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Parent mental health was measured by the Depression, Anxiety and Stress Scale DASS). Regression analysis indicated that parents' ability to support their child with schoolwork was correlated with child mental health status. Further analysis indicated the association between ability to support their child with schoolwork and child mental health status was mediated by parental psychological distress. These findings reinforce the importance of parents as a link between schools and students during the pandemic. As such a COVID-19 recovery plan must prioritise supports for families and schools to ensure that young people have the opportunity to thrive in the post pandemic world.