



**Children's
Neighbourhoods
Scotland**

**COVID-19 Glasgow
Research Briefing:
Family Wellbeing
in Glasgow
September 2020**

Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland

Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the inequalities affecting children and families in Glasgow's high poverty neighbourhoods, and how these have been heightened by the crisis. The aim of this research was to examine service responses to the COVID-19 virus pandemic and the experiences of families, children and young people living in high poverty settings. This briefing focusses on learning in relation to family wellbeing during and after lockdown.

An overview of the research methodology and approach used in this research is presented as an Appendix at the end of this briefing.

This briefing paper forms one of a suite of resources published from the CNS COVID-19 research programme. The [full research report](#), other thematic briefing papers and short insight papers are available on the CNS website childrensneighbourhoods.scot.

Key points and recommendations

- There has been a rapid increase in the number of people receiving welfare benefits across Glasgow and there are concerns that many of these new families in poverty are not known to public services. They will need support in the short-term to access and navigate public services and outreach to connect to the support available.
- The interlinked nature of different stressors on families has been highlighted by this crisis. Financial insecurity, furlough and unemployment, coupled with home schooling, the pressures of childcare, and the uncertainty over schools reopening and availability of childcare has added to the anxiety felt by parents.
- Without action to provide direct support to those experiencing poverty and disadvantage, social, economic and health inequalities are likely to be exacerbated. Agile and collaborative service deployment will be needed to support this. A blended approach, that continues to include digital platforms, will be required over the longer term.
- The length of social isolation may have long-term effects on mental health and wellbeing. Service professionals are concerned about the need to support families to reconnect with their communities, services and other key workers.
- Providing support for wellbeing-focused activities delivered by trusted local organisations could support mental wellbeing and reduce pressure on statutory services.

The wellbeing of children and families in Glasgow

The research findings in this briefing are presented in two sections. The first section describes how families have experienced financial insecurity; digital exclusion; and housing inequalities during the pandemic. The second section describes service providers' perceptions on how lockdown has impacted family wellbeing.

The detailed research findings from this section can be found in the full research report.

1. What are the key challenges that families living in poverty are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Financial insecurity

Service professionals interviewed in this research emphasised that the increase in financial insecurity caused by the crisis has been disproportionately felt by families reliant on lower paid and precarious work, those who are self-employed, and those claiming benefits. Pre-existing poverty in Glasgow has left some families extremely vulnerable to the effects of the crisis.

We know that people were already struggling, in terms of how they manage on very limited incomes. We know that other people, other families, are going to be falling in now, to living in poverty, because of people losing their jobs, they're being furloughed, people who have been self-employed, or have really insecure employment status, for instance, the hospitality industry. So, we know that that's going to increase stress for parents (Kirsty, public sector, Glasgow City).

As a result of workplaces closing, being on furlough and having to give up work due to childcare responsibilities, many parents suffered a loss of or a significant reduction in income. Families could no longer cope with costs that they were previously, only just, able to manage. Increased food and fuel costs as a result of children being at home, and the loss of free school meals, coupled with a reduced income were considered by interviewees to be catastrophic for families who were barely managing before the crisis.

The financial fragility of a lot of these families has really been exposed by COVID. I think a lot of people who are only just about coping, a number of them have been suddenly plunged into financial voids (Sarah, third sector, Glasgow City).

Government policies to protect those who had lost income due to the COVID-19 crisis such as Universal Credit and the Job Retention Scheme (JRS) were regarded as insufficient to meet the immediate needs of some families. Interviewees highlighted that some families were struggling to survive on the 80% of salary that the furlough scheme offered, because their employers did not top this up. With a five week wait period for Universal Credit, several interviewees expressed concern that government financial support was not being processed quickly enough. Furthermore, government support did not take account of the increased costs of food and fuel associated with having all family members at home for a long period of time during lockdown.

The COVID-19 crisis has increased the '*financial fragility*' of families who were previously thought to be '*just coping*' and on the edge of poverty. Families and communities that are most exposed to the

COVID-19 economic shock include those in the social security system, those in precarious, low income jobs, disabled people, those suffering long-term ill health and families living in high poverty neighbourhoods. In addition, a new cohort of families with no previous experience of the benefits system now found themselves in an extremely vulnerable economic position, reliant on government financial support.

Digital inequality

Most interviewees said that the 'digital divide' had significant effects on children's learning during lockdown and the potential for home schooling. Service providers from across sectors were concerned that children's participation in learning during lockdown was inhibited by a lack of access to basic resources, such as phones, tablets or laptops, and the cost of the internet. Third sector workers reported that some families were sharing one device for multiple purposes - school work, social contact with friends and parents doing their own work.

So they perhaps have an iPad in the house, or a laptop in the house, but if there's a parent and three children in the house, and perhaps only one or two devices, the, you know, that's not going to work. (Joanne, third sector, Glasgow South).

Some interviewees noted that the local authority was in the process of distributing digital devices (iPads) to all school pupils in Glasgow city. However, even if families had access to digital devices, the cost of the internet may be an additional barrier to access.

Some of the schools have actually started sending out homework exercises by post because I think they'd assumed that people would be able to access digitally, and they can't. If Glasgow had managed to complete its programme of giving every kid a tablet [...] that might have helped a bit, but even then, we've got households that are lacking broadband access and only have very small data packages on their phones (Sarah, third sector, Glasgow City).

Housing inequality

In some high poverty neighbourhoods in Glasgow, the rate of household overcrowding is over 30%¹. Overcrowded households increase the risk of virus transmission (Barker 2020). People on low incomes are more likely to live in overcrowded households and to have people over the age of 75 years living with them. In these multi-generational households, the risk of death from COVID-19 is higher (Barker 2020).

The majority of third sector research interviewees reflected that the experience of lockdown differed greatly depending on the family housing situation. Lack of private outdoor space combined with the inability of children to go out and play, was impacting family wellbeing. Similarly, not having enough rooms for family members to spend time on their own.

Young people who have very high energy levels and running round the living room in a small house that's jam packed with other young people isn't going to be helpful to everybody else. But if you don't have a garden then it's very difficult for a young person to burn off that energy. (Jill, third sector, Glasgow City).

Some frontline third sector interviewees who were in regular contact with families reported that parents were tired and frustrated trying to keep children entertained and engaged in healthy and

¹ SIMD 2020

constructive ways. This was particularly challenging for parents who were expected to work from home and juggle their work with childcare and home schooling.

2. What impact has COVID-19 had on family wellbeing?

Mental health

New evidence shows that the crisis and lockdown is having distinct impacts on the mental health of children and their families (Banks and Xu, 2020). Communities with high levels of mental health problems in the adult population are likely to see these issues exacerbated making the household context for children more challenging.

Many of the families who engaged with the local service providers interviewed for this study had pre-existing vulnerabilities such as financial insecurity, poor health and wellbeing, or child protection concerns. As such, they were more vulnerable to the mental health effects of the crisis. Through their regular contact and visits to families during lockdown, third sector workers observed that after the first couple of weeks, when the initial rush to organise food provision had settled, families were in greater need of emotional support.

Parents were described by many third sector workers as ‘really struggling’ with home schooling, in part because of practical factors including lack of digital access, lack of time, especially if caring for younger children and working from home: *‘For those of them that are still working trying to juggle work and childcare and home schooling – it is a big ask’*. Interviewees also spoke of the low confidence of some parents in their intellectual ability to support their child(ren)’s learning during lockdown, adding to the stress and pressure on mental health. Children have experienced significant disruption to their normal routines, such as changes to their sleep patterns, and this was also felt to impact on their wellbeing and their ability to learn.

This was a challenge for all families, but most interviewees felt that families in poverty had fewer resources to cope with the inter-linked pressures of lockdown on mental health.

Social relationships and support networks

All interviewees stressed that the loss of social relationships and support networks, both formal and informal, placed an additional burden on families during lockdown. Not being able to see their friends or to go out was challenging for children and young people. Some children were described as *‘withdrawn’* and *‘teary’* because they were missing their friends, and a child protection interviewee suggested this was particularly difficult for adolescents given the importance of peer relationships at that developmental stage.

Frontline third sector workers highlighted that some young people had experienced disruption to semi-formal relationships and support networks, such as volunteering and befriending services, as a result of lockdown. Inequality in access to the internet was raised as a concern, in terms of being able to maintain relationships during lockdown. This was a barrier for families in being able to connect via social media or participate in a group session on Zoom: *‘some of our families don't have access to even some of the most basic resources for them to participate’*.

Parents have struggled with the loss of face-to-face contact with key workers, friends and family. The everyday interactions which previously gave parents the opportunity to speak about any issues or concerns relating to their children were no longer available. Single parents with children at home were

reported to be especially vulnerable to loneliness during the lockdown period due to the loss of informal and formal support networks.

This disruption to social relationships and the social isolation described by the organisations interviewed in this study raises concerns regarding the long-term psychological effects of lockdown and the challenge of how to reconnect families to services once lockdown is over.

Access to public services

Most interviewees, particularly those third sector practitioners who work closely with families, expressed concerns that families who were previously supported by quite a wide range of services, during lockdown received little or no face-to-face support.

[T]here are families that ordinarily would maybe have [...] face-to-face support from school or nursery, [...] the health visitor maybe going in. They are maybe seeing the GP fairly regularly. They might have social work involved [...] They've got all these other agencies involved [...] and currently they're not getting any face-to-face support (Louise, public sector, Glasgow North West).

The COVID-19 crisis created significant challenges for managing services that require contact in-person, within the government guidelines. Only the highest risk children and adults were seen by social work during this time and their priority caseload was frequently reviewed during lockdown. Most other public services did not allow face-to-face contact with their staff for safety reasons. This resulted in the third sector being 'first responders' to some of the most vulnerable families living in high poverty neighbourhoods.

Child welfare

Most interviewees were concerned about the potential for a rise in domestic violence as a result of COVID-19. A third sector interface manager reflected that in the first few weeks, the priority was to address immediate needs such as accessing food, so people were unable to 'even think about accessing support for domestic abuse incidents'. This situation was however described as a 'pressure cooker' as people experiencing domestic violence were unable to leave their homes.

Both third sector and public sector interviewees highlighted the potential for lockdown to 'translate into increased abuse and neglect'. Lockdown restricted the ability of statutory services to detect changes in behaviour and raise concerns about vulnerable adults and children. During this time, interviewees highlighted that third sector organisations, had reported child protection concerns to statutory services. Some third sector organisations were trying to help social work assess the wellbeing of potentially vulnerable children:

Everyone's just gone under the radar, because no one is going into any homes, nobody's really picking up any of the issues. I know health visiting are still going in for some of their key visits, if they can [...] and social work were saying "if you could even have any, face-to-face, over social media, kind of chats with the kids, just to check in with the kids, and see how the kids are getting on" (Suzanne, third sector, Glasgow North West).

The school hubs set up for vulnerable children and children of key workers during lockdown provided a possible route to monitor child welfare. However, a number of interviewees said that many 'vulnerable' families who were eligible for a place had not taken up the offer. The sudden loss of contact with teachers, doctors, social workers, youth workers, and carers, during this period meant there was a reliance on the third sector to sustain contact with families. The prediction from many services who participated in the research was that as the lockdown restrictions eased and children

and families started to interact with services and key workers again, then the longer-term effects of lockdown on psychological wellbeing would begin to emerge and that it may take a considerable amount of time for them to become fully evident.

Families and children with additional support needs

The ramifications of lockdown were considered to be particularly challenging for families with children with additional support needs (ASN). Interviewees described relationships with key workers as important to emotional wellbeing of these children and that access to therapeutic services had been disrupted with lockdown.

Interviewees also cited examples of how different disadvantages intersect to make the lockdown more challenging for specific groups. Disabled people have been disproportionately affected by the removal of face-to-face support from statutory services and more informal support networks increasing social isolation. Racial inequalities exacerbated the impact of lockdown². Third sector interviewees working with BME communities noted that families who do not speak English as a first language face additional barriers trying to access information and support.

Future Planning

This section describes the priority areas for future planning identified by the research. Further findings and insights in these areas can be found in the full research report.

Increased long term demand for services

At the time of the research, many local organisations were only just starting to move out of emergency response mode and were beginning to consider their medium- to longer-term recovery plans and identify knowledge gaps. Key areas where they felt more evidence was needed included: deeper insights into how the circumstances of families have changed and are changing; the economic recession and impact on employment and training opportunities; and the implications of social distancing for organising face-to-face service provision.

Many interviewees framed the experience of the pandemic in the context of Glasgow as a city with a welfare system that was already struggling due to high levels of poverty. In addition, the crisis had also exposed the '*financial fragility*' of a new cohort of families who had been previously '*coping and even thriving*' but were now only '*just coping*'. Interviewees predicted that many of these individuals and families would not be used to navigating the welfare system and would have little if any previous experience of receiving support from public services³.

Third sector organisations were concerned that they may not be in contact with new families in poverty whose circumstances have recently changed and were now in need of support. Identifying these families, the type of support they will need and for how long was highlighted by interviewees as a key issue.

² This issue is explored in more depth in another CNS report on the experiences of refugee and migrant families see *Migrant Families and the Impact of COVID 19* (2020) forthcoming.

³ Note that public services in this context refers to third and public sector services delivered at a local level by professionals across sectors described here as front-line professionals, workers or staff.

Community-based mental health services

Related to the increasing stress on families from economic insecurity and lockdown were concerns about planning for future mental wellbeing and emotional needs. Most interviewees anticipated that there was a '*mental health storm*' ahead. There was also an expectation by interviewees that with the easing of lockdown, there would be a rise in child protection cases, reports of domestic abuse and reports of childhood neglect and abuse. The full scale of the problem was difficult to estimate, but an interviewee suggested services may have to prepare for an immediate rise in reports of abuse, mental health breakdowns and substance misuse '*we might have to weather that, before we get into recovery*'

A small number of interviewees suggested that community-based mental health services could reduce the pressure on statutory services and prevent more serious mental health issues. A local authority funding officer highlighted the potential for expanding provision in the third sector:

There are brilliant projects out there, really, really good projects providing mental health support over and above the core support that is provided through, social work etc, and it could very well be about thinking about how we support those organisations to do more of what they're already doing (Rowan, public sector, Glasgow city).

The new normal? Reconnecting and reintegrating with services after lockdown

Service managers raised concerns about how to reintegrate children and families back into services after lockdown, communicating and connecting with their social networks again. '*You're going to get families that are just going to self-isolate and go into themselves*'.

Local service providers across the public and third sectors emphasised the need for a return to direct one-to-one support and were exploring how this might be possible with social distancing rules. Service managers were exploring creative solutions to enable face-to-face contact with families within their venues as soon as possible. Several interviewees also expressed concerns that people whose circumstances have '*dramatically changed*' were not yet known to local services. A small number of organisations working at a local level expressed anxiety that providing food packages to families during the lockdown may create '*new dependencies*'. On the other hand, the upsurge in volunteering offered new opportunities to widen social connections in local communities and to engage local people in local initiatives.

Interviewees across both sectors recognised that there is an opportunity to increase the agency, resilience and decision-making skills of children and young people through COVID-19 recovery. In the education sector interviewees stated that recovery could provide an opportunity to '*rethink the purpose of education*' and to return to a broader vision and understanding of what it means for children and young people to grow up to be resilient adults.

Discussion

This briefing has presented research findings in relation to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on family wellbeing in Glasgow by capturing the views and insights of the organisations and service providers working most closely with them. In this section we discuss some of the key themes and points of learning gained from the research.

This research has found that the COVID-19 lockdown increased the stresses of poverty and social isolation in Glasgow. Heightened stress in children and young people was associated with a lack of personal space, loss of contact with peers and other adults, boredom and frustration in being at home

but not stimulated, possible neglect and financial worries. The burden of such stress weighed more heavily on some families than others

All service providers interviewed for this research were concerned about parental mental health. With the loss of social support from extended family and friends and contact with key professionals, interviewees predicted a rise in cases of domestic abuse and child neglect. This is supported by recent research which has shown that high levels of family stress increase the likelihood of domestic violence and parental health problems (Schonkoff 2020).

The interviewees in this study also anticipated a negative impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on children and young people's learning and a widening of the gap in educational attainment. Research strongly supports that the gap in educational performance between children by background widens during school breaks (Alexander, Entwisle & Olsen 2007). A recent report by Youthlink Scotland (2020) described children and young people in Scotland as feeling very worried about their education and futures. However, some interviewees in this study also pointed out that COVID-19 recovery policy was an opportunity to rethink the role of education in developing more resilient individuals and building more resilient communities. This could be achieved through a greater focus on wellbeing and community-based mental health services; increased opportunities for learning through play to help children to work through their experiences; and a more enabling approach to community food provision with children and young people taking leadership in local projects to support recovery.

From the research it is clear that trusting relationships between frontline third sector workers and families were critical to identifying issues and providing support to families in high poverty neighbourhoods during the lockdown. When the UK went into lockdown, many third sector organisations diverted their activities to emergency food provision. Over time these organisations also expanded their provision to address other practical needs such as digital access and emotional support. As such, third sector organisations were seen to adopt the role of 'first responders' or 'primary engagers' within communities. The local authority continued to fund third sector organisations and swiftly streamlined funding and decision-making processes to enable organisations to meet the immediate needs of families as quickly as possible.

Conclusion

The pandemic has shone a light on the nature of pre-existing inequalities and the extent to which individuals and families, particularly those in high poverty neighbourhoods, were more vulnerable, due to insecure work and employment, housing and digital inequality. Government policies of self-isolation and social distancing exposed the importance physical space, overcrowding and housing, availability of digital devices, broadband, and mobile data, in shaping and differentiating the experience of lockdown and the wellbeing of families, children and young people in Glasgow.

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Appendix One: Research approach and methodology

From April to June 2020, 15 qualitative interviews were conducted with service providers, working across a range of services in the public and third sectors including housing associations, childcare providers, volunteering, education services, social work and child protection, culture and leisure, community planning; and third sector organisations and interfaces. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by phone or on Zoom video conferencing software and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, with the exception of one interview.

The decision to interview frontline professionals with established and trusting relationships with children and families in high poverty neighbourhoods to understand the breadth of experience of service delivery during lockdown. This was achieved without risk of causing harm or difficulty to families at a time of high anxiety. The research met the highest standards of ethical research conduct, research integrity, data management and data protection, as approved by the University of Glasgow.

The voices and perspectives represented in this report are those of service professionals. Research participants were anonymised to ensure confidentiality. Services and organisations were categorised by sector (public or third sector) and neighbourhoods in terms of their broad geographical area – Glasgow North West, Glasgow North East, Glasgow South, Glasgow City.

The detailed research approach, methodology and interviewee pseudonym and designation is presented in the full research report.



Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland

This report is published by Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland.

About us

A children's neighbourhood is an initiative that brings together people, resources and organisations in a neighbourhood area, so that all of those things can work together towards better lives for the children living there.

Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland is a collaborative centre, developed by Glasgow Centre for Population Health, Policy Scotland and Robert Owen Centre at the University of Glasgow.



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Get in touch

Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland, Third Floor, Olympia Building, Bridgeton Cross, Glasgow, G40 2QH.

Web: childrensneighbourhoods.scot

Twitter: [@cnscotland](https://twitter.com/cnscotland)

Email: childrens-neighbourhoods@glasgow.ac.uk