Statistics briefing: the impact of coronavirus

This briefing looks at what data and statistics are available around the impact of coronavirus on children and their families.

February 2022

Introduction

This briefing introduces data available about the impact of coronavirus on children and their families. Data is available on the impact of coronavirus on: mental health and wellbeing, levels of abuse, pressure on parents and carers and the availability of support services. Statistics can help professionals, and the organisations they work for, make evidence-based decisions about how best to respond to the impact of the pandemic.

What does the data tell us?

- There is no universal experience of coronavirus. The pandemic has impacted different children and their families in different ways.
- Although there have been many negative impacts of the pandemic, some children and families have found some positives too.
- The pandemic has had a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of many children.
- Although data is limited, there are indications that some forms of child abuse have increased during the pandemic.
- The pandemic has placed many families under heightened pressure. Data shows it has impacted on many people’s relationships, financial situations, and their physical and mental health.
• Professionals, who would normally be providing children and their families with support and advice as well as identifying and referring child protection concerns, have not been seeing children and families as regularly as usual.
• Levels of child protection referrals dropped across the UK.

What data is available?

A report by the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR) looked at the representation of children and young people in statistics during the coronavirus pandemic. It found that some key, official statistical outputs included information about children, but there was a gap around the social impact of the pandemic on children. Non-governmental organisations, including charities and think tanks, were found to have helped fill this gap (OSR, 2021).

This briefing gathers data from both official and non-governmental sources to build a fuller picture of the impact of the pandemic on children and their families. Information covered includes:

• demand on services working with children and their families during the pandemic
• police-recorded crime data
• contacts to helplines
• surveys providing data on self-reported experiences during the pandemic.

How can the data be used?

Data can only ever tell part of the story. It’s important to bear in mind the limitations of the data available.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>You can use this data to:</th>
<th>But you can't use it to:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✔ Build a partial picture of children, parents’ and carers’ experiences during the pandemic</td>
<td>✖ Directly attribute the pandemic as the cause of all these experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>✔ Look at the levels of demand on services working with children and families during the pandemic</td>
<td>✖ Directly attribute rising or falling demand for services with rising or falling need for them</td>
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What does the data tell us about the impact of coronavirus?

Child mental health and wellbeing

There is no one universal experience of the pandemic. While for many children the pandemic has proved an incredibly difficult time, others have found some happiness and relief in time spent with their families or away from the pressures of school.

Children have shown great resilience during the pandemic, and some have found positives in the changes in their circumstances

- The Children’s Society’s annual survey of child wellbeing, which took place from April – June 2021, found that 10- to 17-year-olds in the UK gave themselves an average score of 7.7 out of 10 when asked how happy they were yesterday. This is broadly in line with scores from previous years (The Children’s Society, 2021).
- In the early months of the pandemic, a survey by the Children’s Commissioner found a substantial increase in the percentage of 8- to 17-year-olds in England who felt ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ stressed over the past four weeks (from 23 per cent in March 2020 to 42 per cent in June 2020). The percentage of children reporting that they felt stressed on at least ‘some days’ during the last four weeks decreased from 47 per cent to 34 per cent over the same period (Children’s Commissioner, 2020).
- A study of primary school children in Wales identified as ‘at-risk’ for mental health problems found that, although there was an overall increase in mental health issues, there was a significant reduction in separation anxiety and social anxiety during the pandemic. Parents gave an average score for their child’s levels of separation anxiety of 5.11 prior to the pandemic, this declined to 4.33 during the pandemic. The average score for social anxiety also declined, from 4.83 to 3.80 (Adegboye et al, 2021).
- A representative survey of British 13- to 19-year-olds found that, in August – September 2020: 32 per cent of young people said relationships with family or household members had improved, compared with 13 per cent who said they had got worse; and 54 per cent said lockdown had a positive impact on
spending time with members of their family or household (Mental Health Foundation, 2020).

- A representative survey by the YMCA found that 93 per cent of young people in the UK aged between 11 and 16 enjoyed spending more time at home during the first lockdown (YMCA, 2020).
- A UK-wide survey of Girl Guides aged 4-18 during the 2021 lockdown found that:
  - 31 per cent felt more part of their local community than before the pandemic
  - 55 per cent had taken away a new understanding about themselves and the things they enjoy
  - 53 per cent had learnt a new skill
  - 49 per cent felt they had learnt how to cope with difficulties better (Girlguiding, 2021).

However, there has been a decline in wellbeing for many children

Evidence is available on the impact of the pandemic on wellbeing across all age groups.

- A survey of 5,474 new and expectant UK parents in April – June 2020 found that almost half (47 per cent) of parents reported that their baby had become clinger. One quarter (26 per cent) reported their baby crying more than usual (Saunders and Hogg, 2020).
- A survey of 905 nursery workers in the UK in October – December 2020 found that 42 per cent had noticed signs that the emotional wellbeing of the children they were working had been affected by the coronavirus pandemic or lockdowns (Nelinger et al, 2021).
- An online survey of over 2,000 10- to 11-year-old primary school children and over 2,000 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland, which took place between October 2020 and February 2021, found that 41 per cent of 10- to 11-year-olds and 52 per cent of 16-year-olds felt their mental and emotional health had worsened during the pandemic (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2021).
- The Co-SPACE study, which surveyed over 8,000 UK parents and carers, found an increase in behavioural and emotional difficulties among both primary and secondary school children during the January 2021 lockdown. This was especially the case in primary school aged children (4- to 10-year-olds) (Skripkauskaite et al, 2021a).
- A later wave of the same study found that - on average - behavioural, emotional, and attentional difficulties decreased as COVID-19 related restrictions eased from February to April 2021, then remained relatively stable between April and June 2021 (Skripkauskaite et al, 2021b).
For many children with pre-existing mental health issues, the pandemic has exacerbated their conditions

- A study of the mental health of 142 primary school children in Wales identified as ‘at-risk’ for mental health problems found that there was a significant increase in child mental health problems during the pandemic. 69 per cent of the children who took part in the study were found to have high or very high levels of probable mental health problems during the first lockdown, up from 61 per cent prior to the pandemic. This was primarily driven by an increase in levels of probable internalising problems, such as depression or anxiety, up from 34 per cent to 45 per cent (Adegboye et al, 2020).

- A large-scale survey by NHS England in February – March 2021 found that children and young people with a probable mental disorder were more likely to say that lockdown had made their life much worse (26.9 per cent of 11- to 16-year-olds, and 36.3 per cent of 17- to 22-year-olds), than those unlikely to have a mental disorder (9.7 per cent and 18.3 per cent respectively) (Newlove-Delgado et al, 2021).

- In summer 2020, a UK survey of over 2,000 young people aged 13 to 25 who have looked for mental health support at some point in their lives found that around 80 percent believed the pandemic had made their mental health worse (YoungMinds, 2020).

- In February 2021, 75 per cent of surveyed 13- to 25-year-olds who have looked for mental health support at some point in their lives agreed they were finding the current lockdown harder to cope with than previous ones, whilst 67 per cent believed that the pandemic would have a long-term negative effect on their mental health (YoungMinds, 2021a).

Data suggests that overall child suicide deaths did not increase during the pandemic, although there is some evidence of a possible increase during the first lockdown

Emerging research suggests that child suicide deaths did not increase overall during the pandemic (Odd et al, 2021). Analysis is based on small numbers of deaths in England, meaning there was little statistical power to detect anything but major increases in incidence. The categorisation of each death was based on limited data, as most deaths in the analysis were still awaiting a full review from a child death overview panel.

- Data from England’s National Child Mortality Database (NCMD) shows that there was a total of 85 likely childhood deaths by suicide reported between 1 April 2020 and 31 December 2020, compared with 78 for the same time-period in 2019. Statistical analysis found this did not provide statistically significant evidence of an increase in child deaths by suicide.
• Further analysis found weak evidence that the rate in the first lockdown period (1 April to 31 May 2020) was higher than the corresponding period in 2019; with a total of 28 likely childhood deaths by suicide reported during the first lockdown, compared with 18 for the same period the previous year. Any rise did not persist in the immediate post-lockdown period and reduced further in the second lockdown.

• In-depth analysis of 25 likely childhood deaths by suicide during the first lockdown period (23 March to 17 May 2020) identified social restrictions, disruption to care and support services, tensions at home and isolation as potential contributing factors.

There has been an increase in demand for support for mental health conditions, including eating disorders

• There were 55,309 referrals to children and young people’s mental health services in England of children and young people aged 0 to 18 in September 2021, 85% higher than the number of referrals in September 2019 (NHS Digital, 2021a).

• The charity YoungMinds reported a 48% increase in demand for its helpline supporting parents and carers with concerns about their child’s mental health between 2019 and 2021 (YoungMinds, 2021b).

• Despite an overall decline in the number of Childline counselling sessions in 2020/21, both the number and proportion of counselling sessions about mental or emotional health increased.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main concern</th>
<th>2019/20</th>
<th>2020/21</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mental/ emotional health</td>
<td>71,628 (31 per cent)</td>
<td>73,088 (37 per cent)</td>
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• There were 6,657 new referrals for eating disorders of children and young people aged 0 to 18 in England from July to September 2021, a 115% increase on the same time-period in 2019 (NHS Digital, 2021a).

• There were 615 referrals for eating disorders in Scotland for under 18s in 2020/21, up from 456 in 2019/20 (BBC, 2021).

• Calls to Beat’s eating disorder helpline rose 173 per cent between February 2020 and January 2021 (Jayanetti, 2021).

The mental health and wellbeing of some groups of children have been disproportionately affected

• A comparison of levels of demand for an online mental health support service in England in March to May 2019 and March to May 2020 found that help seeking from Black, Asian and minority ethnic young people for anxiety or stress
increased by 11 per cent, compared with a 3 per cent increase for under-18-year-olds from a white background (Campbell, 2020).

- A survey by the Children’s Commissioner for England found that children whose parents were unemployed at the time of the survey in June 2020 were most likely to experience persistent stress. 29 per cent reported feeling stressed most days or every day, compared to 22 per cent of children in the general population (Children’s Commissioner, 2020).

- A survey of 19,528 children and young people aged 7 to 18 from Wales in January 2021 found that disabled children and young people were more likely to be worried about coronavirus, more likely to feel sad and more likely to feel unsafe; and children and young people of Black, Asian and other ethnic minority ethnicities were more likely to feel lonely and less likely to say they feel safe (Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2021).

- The Co-SPACE study found that school-aged children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) and those from low-income households continued to show elevated mental health symptoms throughout the pandemic (Skripkauskaite et al, 2021a, Skripkauskaite et al, 2021b).

Prevalence or incidence of child abuse

**Although data is limited, there are indications that some forms of child abuse have increased during the pandemic**

We don't know exactly how many children in the UK have experienced child abuse during the pandemic. Child abuse is usually hidden from view. Adults in the child’s life may not recognise the signs that they are being abused and the child may be too young, too scared or too ashamed to tell anyone what is happening to them.

The best way to get a clear idea of what is happening to children right now is to survey them about their own experiences of abuse. But, in the absence of such a survey, data from services working with or for children and young people can provide some helpful insights.

- Serious incident notifications are made following the death of a looked after child or the death or serious harm of any child where abuse or neglect was known or suspected in England. The number of notifications increased by 19 per cent in 2020/21, up from 449 in 2019/20 to 536 in 2020/21. The number of notifications which related to child deaths increased by 19 per cent, from 188 to 223; whilst the number of notifications which related to serious harm increased by 12 per cent, from 253 to 284. The first half of the year saw the biggest increase in notifications (DfE, 2021a).
• Data from Great Ormond Street shows that ten children attended the hospital with suspected abusive head trauma between 23 March and 23 April 2020, compared to an average of 0.67 cases over the same period for the three previous years (Sidpra et al, 2020). This is despite a drop in the overall number of children and young people attending accident and emergency departments (RCPCH, 2020).

• The Stop It Now! helpline, which provides a space for adults to talk about their concerns and get help to prevent child sexual abuse, handled 14,197 contacts in 2020/21 – up from 10,636 in 2019/20 (Stop it Now!, 2021).

• Contacts to the NSPCC helpline from adults with a concern about the welfare of a child increased by 23 per cent in 2020/21, from 68,932 to 84,914. NSPCC helpline data shows a marked increase in contacts from adults concerned about the abuse of a child, although only contacts about emotional abuse saw a disproportionate increase.

• Childline delivered fewer counselling sessions with children about their own experiences of abuse in 2020/21 than in 2019/20. This was in line with a decline in the total number of counselling sessions delivered in 2020/21.

| Number of counselling sessions/contacts (and % of all counselling sessions) |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
|                                 | Neglect | Sexual abuse | Physical abuse | Emotional abuse | All abuse |
| NSPCC helpline contacts         | 2019/20 | 11,206  (16%) | 8,612   (12%) | 10,718  (16%) | 8,269   (12%) | 38,805 (56%) |
|                                 | 2020/21 | 12,833  (15%) | 9,469  (11%) | 12,624  (15%) | 11,613  (14%) | 46,539 (55%) |
| Childline counselling sessions  | 2019/20 | 535    (<1%) | 7,679  (3%) | 6,099  (3%) | 4,185  (2%) | 18,498 (8%) |
|                                 | 2020/21 | 491    (<1%) | 5,962  (3%) | 5,238  (3%) | 4,919  (2%) | 16,610 (8%) |

Data also suggests a potential increase in the number of children exposed to domestic abuse during the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened concerns for people who, during lockdowns, were trapped at home with abusive partners, with limited access to their support network and specialist services.

• Police-recorded crime data for England and Wales shows that the number of offences that were flagged as domestic abuse related increased by 6 per cent in the year ending March 2021, compared with the previous year (ONS, 2021a).

• Between April 2020 and February 2021 contacts to and from the National Domestic Abuse Helpline (NDAH) increased by an average of 61 per cent
compared with levels for the first three months of 2020. The number of visits to the Helpline’s website over the same time-period increased from an average of around 10,500 visits a month, to over 73,500 a month (Refuge, 2021).

- A UK-wide survey by Women’s Aid in June 2020 found that 19 out of 31 women who were living with their abuser felt their abuse had worsened during lockdown. In an earlier survey, conducted in April 2020, 17 out of 32 mothers who were experiencing abuse reported that their children had witnessed more abuse towards them during the lockdown, while 12 out of 32 said that their abuser has shown an increase in abusive behaviour towards their children (Women’s Aid, 2020)

- Contacts to the NSPCC helpline about domestic abuse increased in both number and proportion, whereas Childline counselling sessions about domestic abuse decreased in line with an overall decline in counselling sessions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contacts/counselling sessions which mentioned domestic abuse</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of all contacts/counselling sessions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSPCC helpline contacts</td>
<td>2019/20</td>
<td>8,577</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>12%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2020/21</td>
<td>11,603</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Childline counselling sessions</td>
<td>2019/20</td>
<td>3,139</td>
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<td>1%</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2020/21</td>
<td>2,614</td>
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**Children have been spending more time online with less adult supervision, exposing them to an increased risk of online abuse**

- Data compiled by Europol shows significant increases in activity relating to child sexual abuse and exploitation, including a rise in the number of referrals from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to Europol about child sexual abuse material (Europol, 2020).
- The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) identified 153,350 URLs containing images and/or videos of children being sexually abused in 2020. This compares to 132,700 in 2019 - an increase of 16 per cent. Of these, 68,000 reports were tagged as including “self-generated” child sexual abuse content – a 77 per cent increase on 2019’s total of 38,400 reports (IWF, 2021a).
- By 1 November 2021 the IWF had already taken action to remove 200,000 reports of child sexual abuse material since the start of the year, its highest volume to date (IWF, 2021b).
- Police recorded crime data shows an 18 per cent increase in obscene publication offences in **England and Wales** in 2020/21 compared with 2019/20 (Home Office, 2021). In **Scotland** the number of indecent image
offences recorded increased by 13 per cent over the same time-period. In contrast, numbers of obscene publication offences decreased by 7 per cent in Northern Ireland (PSNI, 2021).

- Police recorded crime data also shows a 7 per cent increase in sexual communication with a child offences in Northern Ireland in 2020/21 compared with 2019/20 (PSNI, 2021) and a 5 per cent increase in the offence of communicating indecently with a child in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2021). A freedom of information (FOI) request made by the NSPCC found a 9 per cent increase in the same offence recorded by the 42 police forces in England and Wales who were able to provide data for both years (NSPCC, 2021).

There are signs that some children felt safer from risks outside the home during lockdowns

- A survey with 3,941 young people aged 13 to 25 in England and Wales, which explored young people’s views and experiences of policing during lockdown, found that 32 per cent felt safer during the 2020 lockdown, compared with 12 per cent who said they felt less safe (Leaders Unlocked, 2020).
- A survey of 41 young people aged 14 to 25 in England, who were identified as at risk of violent crime, found that twice as many reported feeling safer during the 2020 lockdown, than those who said they felt less safe (StreetDoctors, 2020).
- In both surveys around half of the surveyed young people did not feel that lockdown had affected their levels of safety either way.

However, there is increasing evidence that the risk of exploitation by people outside the home has not reduced

- Data from the National Referral Mechanism (NRM), a framework for identifying victims of human trafficking and ensuring they receive appropriate support, shows that the number of referrals for potential child trafficking victims decreased by 5 per cent between 2019 and 2020, from 4,545 to 4,326. However, the number of referrals of potential child victims trafficked within the UK increased by 9 per cent, from 3,079 to 3,360. Data from the first three quarters of 2021 show that the average number of referrals of child potential child victims have started to increase, to an average of 1,310 per quarter in 2021 compared with 1,136 per quarter in 2019 (Home Office, 2021).
- Unseen, a charity providing support for survivors of modern slavery and human trafficking, reported an overall decrease of 14 per cent in calls to its helpline in 2020 compared with 2019. However, there was a 7 per cent increase in potential child victims reported to the helpline, predominantly for concerns related to criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation (Unseen, 2021).
Pressures on parents and carers

The coronavirus pandemic has placed many families under heightened pressure. Data shows it has impacted on many people’s relationships, financial situations, and their physical and mental health. These pressures combined have the potential to change what were previously low-risk concerns around children’s safety into much more serious concerns (Romanou and Belton, 2020).

There are some indications that levels of substance misuse have increased during the pandemic

There are signs that some people are turning to drugs or alcohol during the pandemic, both of which, where children are present, are associated with an increased risk of child abuse (NICE, 2017; Laslett et al, 2012).

- An online survey about drug use amongst adults in the UK, which collected 2,621 responses between April and September 2020, found that 43 per cent of respondents had increased their drug use since the start of the pandemic, while 36 per cent had made no change and 21 per cent had reduced it. When comparing their experiences with before the pandemic, more respondents reported experiencing increased withdrawal symptoms, increased non-fatal overdoses, and increased injection equipment-sharing, than reported reduced or the same level of these harms (Aldridge et al, 2021).

- Analysis by Public Health England of 18 surveys measuring alcohol consumption before and during the pandemic found that respondents were more likely to report increasing their alcohol consumption during the pandemic compared to previous years (Public Health England, 2021a).

- The National Association for Children of Alcoholics (NACOA) received 715 calls to its helpline from children who were concerned about a parent’s drinking in April 2020, a 17 per cent increase on the total for April 2019 (Public Health England, 2021a).

- There was a 44 per cent increase in contacts to the NSPCC helpline from people concerned about the impact of parental substance misuse on children in 2020/21 compared with the previous year. The number of Childline counselling sessions about parental substance misuse decreased in line with an overall decline in counselling sessions in 2020/21.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contacts/counselling sessions which mentioned parental substance misuse</th>
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<tr>
<td>Number</td>
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The pandemic has hit many people financially, and analysis suggests that parents and carers have been particularly badly affected.

Since the start of the pandemic, many parents and carers have faced financial insecurity. Research tells us that when adequate support is not available, such tensions may lead to mental and emotional health issues and the use of negative coping strategies. These conditions can, in turn, impact on children’s wellbeing, including increasing the risk of experiencing abuse or neglect (Romanou and Belton, 2020; Bywaters et al, 2016).

Official data on levels of poverty during the pandemic have not yet been released, however a wide range of sources suggest that the pandemic and its associated restrictions has had a significant economic impact on people’s lives.

- Results from the ONS’s weekly Opinion and lifestyle survey, which collects data from a representative sample of households in Great Britain, found that at the start of the pandemic, parents in work were more than twice as likely to report reduced income than non-parents in work (31.7 per cent and 15.1 per cent respectively). For both groups the proportion reporting reduced income has decreased over time, but parents have remained more likely than their peers to experience reduced income throughout the pandemic (ONS, 2021b).
- The same ONS survey found that parents are also less able to afford an unexpected, but necessary, expense than non-parents. 41 per cent said they would not be able to pay for such an expense in April 2021, compared with 21.7 per cent of non-parents (ONS, 2021b).
- Research by the Resolution Foundation suggested that families who were less well off before the pandemic have been disproportionately affected. Online surveys with a representative sample of over 6,000 UK working-age adults found that, during the summer and autumn of 2020, 36 per cent of families with children estimated to be in the lowest pre-pandemic income quintile reported an increase in spending, double the proportion (18 per cent) who reported a decrease. For families in the highest pre-pandemic income quintile the reverse was true, 22 per cent reported an increase in spending, whilst 40 per cent reported a decrease (Brewer and Patrick, 2021).
- UK-wide charity the Trussell Trust reported a 36 per cent increase in emergency food parcels distributed to children in 2020/21 when compared with the previous year, from 722,953 to 980,082 parcels (Trussell Trust, 2021a).
April to September 2021 356,570 food parcels were distributed to children, a 26% decrease on the 478,937 supplied during the same period in 2021, but a 15% increase on the 309,101 supplied in 2019 (Trussell Trust, 2021b).

**Evidence suggests that mental health has declined during COVID-19, and that parents and carers have been particularly badly affected**

Living in a household where parents or carers have mental health problems does not necessarily mean that a child will be negatively affected. However, sometimes, when parental mental health problems occur alongside other stressful life experiences, it can make it very hard for parents or carers to provide their children with the care that they need. And the risk increases if they are isolated or aren't getting the support they need (Cleaver, Unell and Aldgate, 2011; Gatsou et al, 2017; Grove, Reupert and Maybery, 2015; Hogg, 2013; Wolpert et al, 2015).

Surveys suggest that restrictions brought in in response to the pandemic are having a negative impact on some people’s mental health.

- The ONS’s Opinions and lifestyle survey found that levels of reported anxiety among adults in Great Britain rose sharply at the beginning of the first lockdown in March 2020, with the average level of anxiety rising from 3.5 out of 10 in February 2020, to 5.2 in March 2020. Since then, anxiety levels have dropped but remain consistently higher than that of February 2020 and increase during periods of lockdown (ONS, 2021c).
- The Co-SPACE study, which surveyed over 8,000 UK parents and carers, found that parent or carer anxiety, stress and depression all increased between November 2020 and February 2021, surpassing levels reported during the first national lockdown (Skripkauskaite et al, 2021a).
- Data from the UCL COVID-19 Social Study, tracking mental health and wellbeing during the pandemic, found that adults living with children consistently reported higher levels of anxiety symptoms and finance related stress than adults living alone (Public Health England, 2021b).
- An online survey that included a representative sample of over 1,400 parents with a child aged 11 or under found that 44 per cent of mothers and 33 per cent of fathers reported anxiety above a 7 on a scale of 0 to 10, compared with 36 per cent of women and 27 per cent of men in the overall sample (Fawcett Society, 2020).
- 61 per cent of new and expectant UK parents from a survey of 5,474, reported that their emotional and mental health was a main concern for them during the early days of the pandemic. 87 per cent of parents said they were more anxious as a result of COVID-19 and the lockdown. 68 per cent of parents said their ability to cope with their pregnancy or baby had been impacted by COVID-19 (Saunders and Hogg, 2020).
• A study conducted in summer 2020 found that almost half of 162 mothers who were recruited to the study, who lived in London and had a baby aged six months or younger, met the threshold for postnatal depression during the first COVID-19 lockdown. The proportion in this sample (47.5 per cent) was more than double average rates for Europe before the pandemic (23 per cent) (Myers and Emmott, 2021).

• The number and proportion of NSPCC helpline contacts about parental mental health have both increased. The number of Childline counselling sessions about parental mental health decreased in line with an overall reduction in counselling sessions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contacts/counselling sessions which mentioned parental mental health problems</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of all contacts/counselling sessions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>NSPCC helpline contacts</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019/20</td>
<td>2,996</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020/21</td>
<td>4,494</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Childline counselling sessions</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019/20</td>
<td>840</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
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<tr>
<td>2020/21</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
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Access to support services

Professionals, which would normally be providing children and their families with support and advice as well as spotting and referring potential concerns, have not been seeing children and families as regularly as usual.

**Children, including those identified as most vulnerable, have been spending less time in school**

During periods of lockdown, guidance across all four nations advised that only the children of keyworkers and vulnerable children should continue going in to school or childcare. However, many of the children considered most vulnerable did not attend school, reducing teachers’ and early years practitioners’ ability to pick up on potential safeguarding concerns.

• In **England**, in the first week of the first national lockdown an average of 6 per cent of vulnerable children were in school. This rose to an average of 26 per cent by the last week of the 2019/20 school year. When schools closed to most pupils for a second time in January 2021, an average of 39 per cent of children...
with a social worker attended school in the first week, rising to 51 per cent by the final week (DfE, 2021b).

- In **Wales**, in the week commencing the 30 March 2020, the first week for which data was collected following the first lockdown, an average of 1 per cent of vulnerable children attended school. By the week commencing 22 June 2020, just before children returned to school, this proportion had risen to 6 per cent (Welsh Government, 2020). Data is not available for the proportion of vulnerable children attending school during the lockdown which started in January 2021.

- In **Scotland** on 27 March 2020, 533 vulnerable children attended an education setting (less than 1 per cent of children with a multi-agency child’s plan). By 14 May 2020 this had increased to 2,058, with all children beginning the return to education from 11 August 2020. Data is not available for attendance levels during the January 2021 lockdown (Scottish Government, 2020).

- In **Northern Ireland** at the start of the first national lockdown an average of 145 vulnerable children attended open settings. By the end of the 2019/20 school year this had risen to an average of 454 (OpenDataNI, 2021). At the start of the January 2021 lockdown, 3,279 vulnerable children were reported to be on site. This rose to 5,148 in the week before all children began to return to school (Department of Education, 2021a). Data is not provided for Northern Ireland for the proportion of all vulnerable children who were physically attending schools.

**Lockdown measures have also meant that many youth work projects have been shut down, or severely restricted**

- A survey of 1,759 small and medium-sized youth organisations in November 2020 found that 58 per cent of participating organisations were operating at a reduced level, with a further 20 per cent temporarily closed or preparing to permanently close. 64 per cent were at risk of closure in the next 12 months (UK Youth, 2021).

**Parents and carers have also reported difficulties accessing early years services**

- A survey of over 2,000 parents and carers of 0- to 5-year-olds in **England** between June and July 2021 found that 82 per cent of parents had either been unable, or struggled, to access a service.

- 78 per cent of parents and carers who had been unable to access a service said they were worried about the impact on themselves or their child (Action for Children, 2021).
Health services have seen a reduction in contact with patients, although numbers have increased over time

- Data collected by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health from Trust and Health Board Organisations in the UK found that near the start of the first lockdown, on 17 April 2020, 86 per cent of organisations reported a decrease in the levels of children attending hospital as inpatients, while 70 per cent reported a decrease in child outpatients and 87 per cent reported a decline in attendances for urgent care or to the emergency department. By 3 July 2020, the last time this information was collected, the situation had improved, with the proportion of organisations reporting a decrease in patients dropping to 49 per cent, 56 per cent and 52 per cent respectively (RCPCH, 2020).
- Evidence also suggests that parents and carers were waiting longer than normal before seeking medical assistance. A large-scale survey of paediatric consultants in the UK and Ireland in April 2020 found that 32 per cent of paediatricians had seen a child later than they would have expected to prior to the pandemic (Lynn et al, 2020).
- A survey of UK parents of under-two-year-olds from 29 April to 3 June 2020 found just 11 per cent had seen a health visitor face-to-face during the early days of the pandemic (Saunders and Hogg, 2020).
- In April 2020, 16.6 million GP appointments were estimated to have taken place in England, compared to 24.6 million in April 2019. Nearly half – 48 per cent – of all appointments took place over the phone, compared to 14 per cent in April 2019. By October 2021 the number of appointments had risen to an estimated 30.4 million (excluding appointments for COVID-19 vaccinations), similar to pre-coronavirus levels. However, 31 per cent of appointments continued to take place over the phone. Although there are limitations to how much can be inferred from this experimental data, it does suggest that there was an initial reduction in people seeing their GPs, and an increase in appointments taking place over the phone rather than in person (NHS Digital, 2021b).
- A YoungMinds survey with 2,011 11- to 18-year-olds with a history of mental health needs carried out during the first four weeks of the 2020/21 school year found that almost a quarter of respondents (23 per cent) said there was less mental health support in their school than before the pandemic, while only 9 per cent agreed that there was more support (YoungMinds, 2021c).

This was reflected in drops in levels of child protection referrals across the UK

- In England, the total number of referrals between 27 April 2020 and 11 July 2021 was 10 per cent lower than the average for the same weeks during 2017-20. Referrals from schools showed a particularly sharp decline during periods of
lockdown, with a 76 per cent decline in referrals from schools from 18-24 May 2020 and a 60 per cent decline from 11 – 17 January 2021 when compared with the average for the three previous years over the same time-period (DfE, 2021c).

- In **Wales**, in the early days of the first national lockdown, the Children’s Commissioner in Wales reported that most local authorities were seeing a reduction in safeguarding referrals, with one authority reporting a 50 per cent drop compared to the same period last year (Children’s Commissioner for Wales, 2020).

- In **Scotland**, the Children’s Hearing System, Scotland’s care and justice system for children and young people who commit offences or who need care and protection, saw a 27 per cent reduction in non-offence-related referrals for 23 March to 5 May 2020 compared with the same period the previous year (Scottish Government, 2020).

- In **Northern Ireland**, the total number of child protection referrals in 2020/21 was 1,921, a 37% decrease on the 2019/20 total of 3,058 (Department of Health (DoH), 2021).

Despite the substantial fall in referrals, there has only been a small – or no - decrease in children entering the child protection system

Data from **Scotland** suggests that a reduction in referrals initially had a significant impact on the number of children entering the child protection system.

- In May 2020, the Scottish Government reported: a 20 per cent reduction in cases where Health, Police and Social Work have identified sufficient evidence to consider planning a child protection investigation; a 26 per cent reduction in the number of children identified as needing child protection plans; and a 47 per cent reduction in the number of children becoming ‘looked after’ (Scottish Government, 2020).

However, annual child protection statistics (which have so far been released for **England and Northern Ireland** only) show that, overall, the numbers of children entering the child protection system have not decreased at the same rate as referrals, and in some cases, numbers have remained stable.

- In **England**, the number of children starting an episode of need decreased by 7 per cent from 381,020 in 2019/20 to 355,260 in 2020/21. In **Northern Ireland** the number of children in need referred to social services decreased by 5 per cent, from 33,885 in 2019/20 to 32,070 in 2020/21 (DoH, 2021). Numbers in both nations were decreasing before the pandemic.

- In **England**, the number of children becoming the subject of a child protection plan decreased by 4 per cent, from 66,380 in 2019/20 to 63,830 in 2020/21 (DfE, 2021d). In **Northern Ireland** the number of child protection registrations
increased by 1 per cent, from 2,040 in 2019/20 to 2,065 in 2020/21 (DoH, 2021).

- In **England**, 28,440 children started to be looked after in 2020/21, an 8 per cent decrease on the total of 31,010 for 2019/20. Numbers had been decreasing in previous years, but at a slower rate (DfE, 2021d). In **Northern Ireland** the number of children starting to be looked after remained consistent, at 896 in 2019/20 compared with 893 in 2020/21 (DoH, 2021).

Data also shows that coronavirus restrictions have had a significant impact on family courts and care proceedings.

- In 2020 the duration of care proceedings in **England and Wales** reached its highest level since the 26-week rule was introduced in 2014, at an average of 38.5 weeks. This was despite the number of cases falling (MoJ, 2021).

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Further information

For information about safeguarding and coronavirus see NSPCC Learning nspcc.org.uk/covid

Sign up for our weekly current awareness email newsletter nspcc.org.uk/caspar

Visit NSPCC Learning to learn more about the statistics behind child abuse nspcc.org.uk/statistics