

**EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY**
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THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC FOR POLICY IN RELATION TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

A RESEARCH REVIEW

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BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

COVID-19 has led to a global public health crisis. Measures to reduce transmission have resulted in the closure of educational institutions and workplaces, and reduced social interaction. Rates of serious illness from COVID-19 have been very low among children and young people. However, the impact on their lives has been substantial, both directly because of the closure of schools and lack of face-to-face interaction with peers and wider family, and indirectly because of increased financial stress for many families. This report presents a critical analysis of Irish and international research involving children and young people before and during the pandemic period as a basis for discussing the implications for policy development. The study focuses on four main domains: family and peer relationships; formal and informal learning; physical and mental health and wellbeing; and transitions to further/higher education, training and the youth labour market. As restrictions ease, it is timely to look at policies to address the impact of the pandemic and what compensatory measures might be needed to ameliorate the effects of restrictions.

RESEARCH ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

Since the start of the pandemic, many studies have been conducted internationally on the impact of restrictions on individuals and families. At the time of writing, much of this research is ongoing, with findings from many studies yet to be published. Much of the research has been based on online or convenience samples. Such surveys have the advantage of being quick to administer and thus flexible in responding to emerging issues. However, the self-selective nature of responses means that the findings cannot be generalised to the population as a whole. Other studies have been based on rapid reviews of existing studies on relevant issues (such as the effects of quarantine) or have used qualitative methods to investigate the experiences of particular groups. Studies based on representative samples of the population have been less common and largely focus on adults, with a lack of systematic research on the experiences of children and young people in Ireland during the period of pandemic restrictions. This review places greater weight on studies based on representative samples, though studies based on convenience samples are mentioned where their findings are suggestive of emerging issues.

COVID-19 AND INEQUALITY

The Growing Up in Ireland study and other research studies have documented the inequalities evident in the lives of children and young people in Ireland in the pre-COVID-19 period: those from more disadvantaged backgrounds have poorer

health, lower levels of physical activity, poorer-quality diet, greater disengagement from school, lower academic performance and more socio-emotional difficulties. Having a special educational need or being from a minority group, such as Travellers or asylum-seekers, serve as additional sources of inequality. Available evidence in Ireland and internationally suggests that these inequalities have grown in the wake of the pandemic. The negative effects on wellbeing and mental health have been more apparent among those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as well as among younger adults. The impact is gendered; women are more likely to report feelings of depression, anxiety or sadness during the period of restrictions. While there is less systematic evidence on the effects on children, findings suggest increased inequality for them too. Children's wellbeing is highly influenced by parental stress and depression, so a reduction in their parents' wellbeing is likely to affect them. Given that emotional difficulties increased more for younger adults during the period of restrictions, they are likely to have done so for children and young people.

Increased inequality is also related to the differential economic impact of pandemic-related restrictions. Job losses have been concentrated among younger and lower-income groups, and unemployment is predicted to remain at relatively high levels in the short to medium term. Previous research has pointed to the negative effects of recessions on children's socio-emotional and educational outcomes. Therefore, greater financial strain in many families, particularly after the phasing-out of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, will negatively affect the wellbeing of children and young people. Young people making the transition to the labour market are likely to face particular difficulties in obtaining employment, especially as emigration is no longer an option for those who face difficulties in accessing jobs in Ireland.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY DEVELOPMENT

The review highlights the importance of policy intervention to address the growing inequality evident over the period of restrictions. Available evidence indicates that school closures have resulted in marked inequalities, as children and young people vary in their access to books and digital resources and parents themselves have differential educational, cultural, and time resources to support their children's learning. Evidence points, too, to a digital divide between schools, with some schools making a smoother transition to distance education where they had the infrastructure in place and/or greater prior experience of digital teaching and learning. Children and young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds will return to school having suffered greater levels of 'learning loss' on average. Indeed, there is a risk that some of those who were not highly engaged in school before the closure may not re-engage in full-time education. Children with special educational needs will likely face particular challenges in readjusting to the routine of school and in making up learning loss. If schools do not resume on a full-cohort or full-time basis in the coming school year, the learning loss is likely to continue

to grow, especially for socio-economically disadvantaged students and those with special educational needs. Additional learning supports will be crucial when schools resume to make up for the (differential) learning loss experienced by students, with individual and small group tuition emerging as the most effective supports from previous research. For younger children, play-based learning will be an important component of re-engaging them in education and addressing the learning gap. In addition to the summer programme, supports will be required to assist children and young people with special educational needs to reintegrate into school. The provision of such supports, especially one-to-one and small-group tuition, will require the allocation of substantial resources in the coming academic year, but this increased expenditure should be set against the societal costs of early school-leaving and academic underperformance.

In reopening schools, learning supports should be placed in the context of the broad spectrum of activities and supports offered in schools. Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) and the broader wellbeing programme at junior cycle are likely to be a very important resource in young people's adjustment to a post-COVID-19 world; additional supports in the form of SPHE and life skills could be usefully incorporated into senior cycle. Ongoing professional development (through Education Centres and other organisations such as Jigsaw) and other resources for teachers are crucial in this respect. Some children and young people will experience greater psychological difficulties than others. Given the level of unmet need in child and adolescent mental health services, there is a case for enhancing access to specialist psychological and therapeutic supports through schools, building on existing provision such as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and the School Completion Programme.

Summer camps or programmes, and subsequently after-school provision, provide an important opportunity for young people to re-engage in sports and cultural activities. However, the paid-for nature of much provision will serve as a constraint for low-income families, highlighting the importance of community-based provision, such as the School Completion Programme and local youth clubs, in catering for more socio-economically disadvantaged groups.

The transition to life after school will be very different for cohort 2020 than for earlier cohorts. Higher education institutions appear likely to use blended learning for at least part of the coming academic year, highlighting the importance of addressing the digital divide in access to resources and adopting innovative approaches to providing academic and social support to students to enhance their wellbeing and prevent dropout. The resumption of face-to-face provision is particularly important for further education courses (such as Youthreach) which cater for more disadvantaged groups of young people where relationships of trust between participants and staff are key in re-engaging disaffected youth. Young people entering the labour market face particular challenges and need additional

supports to avoid long-term damage to their prospects. Such supports include early intervention to provide career guidance and promote retention as well as targeted (re)training to respond to potential new areas of employment growth. Employers that provide apprenticeships may need particular supports to maintain training, and incentives may be required for employers to take on apprentices in the coming year.

The pandemic experience has highlighted broader policy challenges, including the reliance on a largely market-based model of early-years service provision and inequalities in access to health services, including psychological and therapeutic supports, providing further impetus for the roll-out of Sláintecare, the National Oral Health Policy and the Sharing the Vision policy for mental health services.

THE NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Research on earlier disasters (such as Hurricane Katrina) and recessions have pointed to longer-term effects on the developmental outcomes of children and young people. It is crucial, therefore, that systematic evidence on the impact on children and young people of the pandemic restrictions and related economic shock is collected to inform policy development. A dedicated survey of the Growing Up in Ireland cohorts would provide such an evidence base. It would be crucial that such a survey capture the perceived effects of the pandemic restrictions on direct aspects of young people's lives as well as objective changes in outcomes before and after the pandemic. This study could collect information on variation in the direct experience of the pandemic (for example, the illness of a family member) and in experiences of the restrictions (for example, the level of contact from their school) and the effects of such variation.

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