

We're all in this together?

The essential public health measures that have been taken to stop the spread of Covid-19 have affected everyone in the country, and many families are struggling with additional financial and social pressures. But there are some children, who before this crisis were already vulnerable or living in precarious situations, who are facing particular hardship. These children have been cut off from many of the sources of support that they might previously have had – schools, children's centres, health visitors, networks of family and friends, home visits from social workers – at the same time as their families are under new stress and strain from lockdown requirements.

The Children's Commissioner's local area profiles of child vulnerability provide a way for councils to understand which groups of children are likely to be at risk under lockdown, and how many children in their area fall into those groups. It also provides a framework for central government to target additional resources at the areas most in need. Local authorities should be factoring this information into their decision making when it comes to Covid-19 responses – for example if 26% of the children in your area live in crowded homes (as is the case in Newham), making sure there is space for them to play outdoors, or getting them into schools, should be a priority.

We are publishing this work in order to better identify vulnerable children who need help both during the lockdown and once the crisis has passed. The current unprecedented crisis is opening the eyes of many to the generational problems that have blighted the life chances of millions of our children for decades. Intensive support for vulnerable children – to protect them now and to help them do well at school and in life in the future – must be a key part of the 'new normal'.

Families under increased pressure

Many children are potentially vulnerable due to difficulties their families were facing before lockdown. For these families the loss of support networks, alongside the anxiety and financial pressures caused by Covid-19, could be what tips them from being able to cope, to reaching crisis point. There are many hundreds of thousands of children in England living in households where there is domestic violence, adult mental ill health and substance abuse. Many of them are not known to social services.¹ For those who are known to services, during the current crisis, there is a real risk that many more will become 'invisible' – those who were getting early help from non-statutory services, or those assessed as 'lower risk' by social workers. While some children will still be getting home visits from social workers, those assessed as lower risk will be more likely to get support through virtual contact. But for these families the additional pressures from Covid-19 might turn a 'lower risk' situation into something worse. Some examples:

Children whose parents suffer from mental ill-health

Many parents with mental health issues will be able to parent perfectly well, but the increased anxiety Covid-19 causes, alongside increased difficulties in accessing support services, sharpens the challenge. Over 1.5million children (13.5%) in England live in families where one parent or carer has a severe mental health problem, and in some areas such as Manchester and Islington this rises to 18% of children, whereas in Wokingham and Buckinghamshire it is 10% or fewer children.

Young carers

There are an estimated 102,000 young carers in England, but only 35,000 are known to Local Authorities.² Our area profiles show that the number of young carers known to LAs varies significantly – with Torbay supporting over 500 young carers while 10 LAs appear to have none. Many of these children will now have significantly increased responsibilities, as parents who are unwell or have underlying conditions will not be able to leave the house. The children are also likely to have increased anxiety and worries for loved ones. At the same time they will likely no longer be attending school or any support groups for young carers which can bring a degree of respite.

Children with SEND

Although children with Education, Health and Care Plans are entitled to a place at school, families are being encouraged only to take these up if they cannot meet children's needs at home – and the recent figures show that most of these children are staying at home. In addition, we hear through our helpline that some special schools are closing or sending children with EHC plans home due to staff shortages. But caring for and educating a child with additional needs may place more pressure on families, especially if they are not supported to do so. There are over 270,000 children with EHC plans in England, and our framework shows that some areas have proportionately far more children with plans than others – for example, in Torbay 41 children per 1000 have a plan, while in Newham only six children per 1000 do. There will also be children who have additional needs but who have not got an EHC plan – this varies from just under 3,000 children in Havering (51 children per 1000) compared to nearly 12,000 children (a rate of 125 per 1000) in Liverpool. Overall, over 1 million children have SEND but do not have an EHC plan.

¹ Children's Commissioner's Vulnerability Report 2019

² <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/cco-vulnerability-2019-tech-report-1.pdf>

Children at risk or suffering harm

And then there are some children who we already know are living in dangerous circumstances – who are experiencing neglect, abuse and serious harm. For these children, as for adult victims of abuse, they are now forced constantly to stay at home in places where they are likely to be scared and in danger, with no way out. These are the children for whom school can be a reprieve, where trusting relationships need to be built up with social workers, and where close monitoring is needed to understand if they can stay at home or need to be in care. Guidance has been issued for social workers to prioritise the children at most risk for home visits, and to ensure that all these children are in school – however social workers often find it hard to engage with these families even without the added difficulties posed by Covid-19, and 95% of vulnerable children are not attending school.

Child protection

We know that many children will not disclose abuse until they are adults, if indeed they ever do, so our knowledge of how many children face abuse in their homes will always be an underestimate. However, we know how many children in each area are placed on child protection plans because they are suffering, or at risk of suffering, significant harm. There are over 50,000 children in the country on these plans, but there is significant variation around the country – in Blackpool, for example, 13 children in 1000 are placed on child protection plans, while in Westminster it is only 1 per 1000.

Domestic abuse

Our vulnerability report last year found that 830,000 children in England live in homes where domestic abuse has taken place in the last year³. The matrix of local need suggests that the prevalence of this varies considerably between different areas – around 5% of children in Wokingham and Surrey live in a household where domestic abuse is occurring, while over 10% in Hackney do so. There has been significant attention given to the risk to adults experiencing domestic abuse during lockdown, and some additional guidance and funding for helplines announced. However, children also suffer from being exposed to such abuse, and two thirds of the women in refuges have children with them.

Criminal exploitation

Although the initial signs are that lockdown requirements have led to a drop-off in gang related activity, there is a real risk that gangs will be finding new ways to operate and exploit children which we do not yet know about. Many of the early warning systems – such as schools noticing changes in children’s behaviour – are now closed. Over 10,000 children known to children’s services were identified as being in gangs – with 270 children in Tower Hamlets recorded as having gang involvement. However, our previous research has shown that these figures are likely to be the tip of the iceberg, and that many more children are in gangs than are known to local services.⁴ The challenges of identifying this group is even more difficult now, with schools and youth workers less able to see these children.

³ Children’s Commissioner Vulnerability Report 2019

⁴ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/keeping-kids-safe/>

Children in care

Children in care who are living in long-term placements where they are supported by loving carers may be managing well during this period. However, the 78,000 children in care may also be facing some additional difficulties – for many, face to face contact with their families will not be able to go ahead. Many of these children will have experienced trauma, yet during this time access to therapeutic support will be much more difficult. Our framework shows that in some Local Authorities the numbers of children in care are as low as 4 per 1000 (Richmond upon Thames and Wokingham), while in Middlesbrough and Blackpool the rates are 5 times higher.

Children in unregulated settings

Of those children in care, perhaps the ones who are most vulnerable are those 6,183 children in unregulated settings – settings which are not technically allowed to provide ‘care’. These children will have to isolate without any family or carers around them, and if they do fall ill it is not clear who will be able to look after them. Over 6,000 children live in these kinds of settings, with Gateshead having 0.1 child per 1000 in these settings, whereas Liverpool has 1.6 children per 1000 – a rate 16 times higher.

Children who are at risk of falling behind in education

Children living in poverty

We know that children living in poverty already face significant educational disadvantages. The public health measures have meant 99% of children – and 95% of children defined by the government as ‘vulnerable’ – are no longer attending school or early years education⁵. However the impacts of missing school are not felt equally across all children. Every year we see children from poor backgrounds falling further behind over the six week summer break, and longitudinal studies show that extra time in nurseries for young children helps to close the disadvantage gap.

Across England 4.1 million children are living in poverty,⁶ and 1.22 million claim free school meals – 15% of all children. Different local authorities will be facing very different challenges when it comes to children in poverty – in some LAs (Knowsley, Tower Hamlets and Hartlepool) over 30% of children are eligible for Free School Meals, while in Rutland, Wokingham and Windsor this number is between 5 and 7% of children. The same holds true on other measures – in wealthier LAs only around 30 children per 1000 are in households claiming Universal Credit, but this rate is five times higher in more deprived LAs.

Children with poor internet access

There have been a host of innovative approaches to keep children learning when schools are closed – at the national level with the Oak National Academy offering online lessons and BBC Bitesize providing celebrity teachers, and with each individual school using a range of online tools to engage children. In order to access this, children need, alongside laptops, a good internet connection – something unavailable to 8% of British households do not have.

The Department for Education has committed to providing 4G routers to disadvantaged secondary school pupils and care leavers. This is positive, but even with these measures our data shows that over 150,000 children in the country live in homes that are simply not reached by decent 4G and broadband. There is real variation around the country in terms of access to fast broadband – with 75 children per 1000 in Devon lacking this access, compared to less than 1 in 1000 in Luton, Blackpool and Derby. Children in rural areas likely to struggle more with internet availability. Of course, availability is only side of the coin; what also matters is whether families can afford decent broadband internet packages.

Poor housing conditions

Many families will be finding the rules around staying at home and home-schooling their children a challenge. But for those who are living in overcrowded conditions, finding space for children to learn and play will be far harder. Our data shows that children in London are particularly likely to be living in crowded homes – the ten Local Authorities with the most children living in crowded conditions are all in London. 26% of children in Newham live in houses where they have fewer bedrooms that they need, compared to only 1% of children in Rutland. In England as a whole 4.6% of children live in crowded homes.⁷

⁵ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/880424/Coronavirus_COVID-19_attendance_in_education_and_early_years_settings_summary_of_returns.pdf

⁶ Children in relative poverty after housing costs from Department of Work and Pensions, *Households Below Average Income 2018/19*

⁷ At the time of the 2011 Census

Summary

The groups highlighted above show just some of the many different ways in which children can be vulnerable – those for which high-quality local data is available. Our local area profiles provide a detailed breakdown for every single local authority of these and other vulnerable groups. It is important to remember that these data show baseline – pre-Coronavirus – levels of needs. These children were already vulnerable before COVID-19, and they are likely to be even more at risk now. We hope these profiles will be a valuable resource to help local agencies better understand which children are known to be at risk, and which children they need to find out more about. By mapping the levels of current need, they can work together with local partners and ensure that the needs of vulnerable families are prioritised now and in the future.