

Children of the pandemic

Introduction and background

The current COVID-19 crisis has highlighted the fact that schools and childcare settings represent a vital social infrastructure without which large parts of the economy cannot continue to function. This report from the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) takes a closer look at the effect of school and childcare closures. It sets out 3 key policy priorities on which its recommendations are based.

Key findings

Growing economic insecurity and risk of child poverty

- Following school and childcare closures, an estimated 3.9 million parents may have to stop or reduce work to care for children. Although children on free school meals will continue to receive support in-kind, there are extra costs for all parents who are having to educate and entertain their children at home.
- Certain groups of children will be particularly affected, particularly those whose parents' employment has been directly affected or those who have at least one parent who is self-employed. Although the government's furlough scheme and the package of support for the self-employed will mitigate the financial consequences for these parents, the schemes will inevitably take time to establish.
- Even once the schemes are up and running, they may be insufficient for low-income families. There are 3 million children living in poverty despite their parents being in work. The 20 per cent pay cut implied by the Job Retention Scheme will mean that it is still very difficult for these families to cope.
- Many children will be living in families where parents are newly unemployed, and who will be reliant on universal credit (UC). There were over half a million new claims for UC in mid-March and more people are currently at risk of losing their jobs, despite the government's efforts. Many families among the new UC claimants are likely to experience a considerable reduction in income. More generally, rising unemployment is likely to lead to a higher incidence of indebtedness, destitution, and child poverty.

Closure of schools and childcare settings

- The current crisis has meant not only that education has been curtailed, but also that children no longer have access to informal care networks of family, friends and grandparents. This means that millions of parents are now juggling work and care. Parents can legally ask for time off work to care for children, but this leave is unpaid, and is therefore neither feasible nor sustainable for most parents. Lone parents are under more pressure with just one income and no one with whom the childcare can be shared.
- For the 78,000 looked-after children and young people in the UK, this period brings fresh insecurities, for example, if foster or 'kinship' carers or staff at children's homes

become ill. There are also new challenges for the 1.3 million children who have special educational needs or a disability (SEND), as well as for their families and carers, since the respite care and facilities they depend on are no longer available.

- The shift to online learning is likely to widen the gap between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers. An estimated 1 million children and their families do not have adequate access to a device or connectivity at home and 36 per cent of 16-24 year olds live in mobile-only households. A recent survey from Teach First has shown that only 2 per cent of teachers working in the most disadvantaged schools believe their pupils have adequate access to online learning. Furthermore, the cafes, schools, and libraries on which many children rely for internet access are now all closed.
- Digital access is important not just for education, but also for wellbeing and mental health, as social activity moves online.

The impact of restrictions on outdoor activities

- The current social distancing rules are particularly hard for children who do not have direct access to a garden or to local green spaces.
- There are a number of reasons why access to outdoor space is important. Children aged 5 from the poorest income groups are twice as likely to be obese compared to their most well-off counterparts, and by age 11 they are 3 times as likely; lack of outdoor space could exacerbate this problem over time.
- Although children can exercise indoors, evidence shows that outdoor exercise brings additional benefits to mental wellbeing that are not seen with similar levels of indoor physical activity.
- While many impacts of the coronavirus crisis are beyond the government's control, there are steps it can take to address the above-mentioned challenges for children and their families. The IPPR has identified 3 priorities: increasing financial security to reduce economic insecurity and prevent a rise in child poverty; improving digital access and ensuring access to outdoor space.

Priority 1: Financial security

- For many parents, it may not be possible or desirable to combine caring for children with paid employment. Sometimes, a satisfactory flexible working arrangement can be agreed with an employer, but other options such as paid leave are needed if this is not possible. Forms of paid leave for parents are available in other countries facing restrictions, including France, Italy and in the US.
- While initial indications were that the government's furlough scheme would include the offer of paid leave for parents, recent guidance from HM Treasury suggests that this is not the case. This means that up to 3.5 million parent employees affected by school closures will not be covered by the scheme if they must take time out of work or reduce their working hours.
- **Recommendation: The government should ensure those with full-time caring responsibilities, including parents, can access paid leave through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. It should also introduce a statutory 'right to request' for the 80 per cent wage subsidy up to £2500 a month. This should be accompanied by a clear 'right to return', ensuring they can return to their job without the risk of employer discrimination. To avoid distancing from the workplace or possible future discrimination, there should also be the option for an employee to reduce their hours or to share paid leave with a partner.**
- With 500,000 new claims already made in recent weeks, shoring up Universal Credit (UC) to help avoid increases in child poverty and economic insecurity must now be an urgent priority. The government has boosted UC with an increase to the standard allowance (the basic payment for all who receive the benefit) of £1,000 a year for the next 12 months. However, even with this boost, the average UC award will be far behind the minimum income standard (MIS), the level of income needed to buy things that members of the public think that everyone in the UK should be able to afford.
- **Recommendation: the government should invest further in universal credit by increasing the child element of UC and child tax credit by £520 annually per child, alongside removing the 2-child limit and the benefit cap. The UC advance should be turned into a grant and debt deductions suspended for the duration of the crisis, as previously recommended by IPPR. The government should also further raise the standard allowance to £472 per month, taking it to just under one third of the minimum income standard (MIS). Child benefit is a universal benefit which reaches 12.7 million children. Increasing this benefit would help meet urgent need among those parents not covered by the announced schemes or who are working reduced hours. Recommendation: The government should introduce a one-off child benefit emergency payment of £30 and increase child benefit by £20 a month (£5 per week per child) for the duration of the crisis. IPPR modelling shows that this would focus financial assistance on lower income groups, with a one-off cost for the emergency payment of an estimated £300 million and ongoing costs per quarter of an estimated £600 million.**
- The government should also consider covering up to 100 per cent of salary costs for low-income families, rather than 80 per cent. When HMRC calculates the level of payment due through this scheme, it could incorporate a minimum floor value for parents with children, thereby ensuring full-time workers' income is always at least equivalent to 35 hours at the national minimum wage.

Priority 2: Digital access

- As discussed above, lack of digital access not only risks the widening of gaps, but also impacts on children's hobbies, social contact and exercise.
- **Recommendations: The government has recently secured a deal with telecommunications providers to scrap data allowances so that people can stay connected during the crisis. Government should go a step further and work with these providers and schools to identify children in mobile-only homes or without any current internet access, to ensure that they can have broadband installed to take advantage of low or zero rates.**
- **For children (including children in care) who do not have adequate devices at home for online schooling, the government should work with schools and technology companies to see if devices can be donated or whether they can be loaned by the school. Where neither of these options is possible funding should be made available for this through a new Digital Education Access fund.**

Priority 3: Access to outdoor space

- While some children will have access to green spaces, current restrictions will be particularly strongly felt by children without access to a park or a garden. This is a particular risk in densely populated and deprived areas where children are 3 times more likely to be obese.
- **Recommendation: Local authorities should encourage owners of private green spaces to offer open access for the duration of the crisis, particularly in urban or densely populated areas, to help reduce numbers using public parks and green spaces. If further restrictions on time for exercise or to parks and outdoor spaces are introduced, local authorities should consider maintaining access to parks for those children who are living in a home or flat without a garden or in densely populated areas. This could be done by relying on an honesty system, rather than by enforcement, as is currently the case with instructions to exercise once a day.**

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.ippr.org/research/publications/children-of-the-pandemic>