

Covid 19 Social and Economic Issue Analysis: risks to children

What does the Government say about this issue?

The Government recognises that the Covid-19 outbreak is likely to have a negative impact on children and young people, particularly those who are vulnerable (defined as those who are supported by the child social care system; children with education, health and care (EHC) plans; or otherwise identified as vulnerable by educational providers or local authorities. It also recognises that local authorities may struggle to meet the full range of statutory duties relating to child protection, safeguarding and care during the pandemic.

Additional groups of children including children in poverty, migrant and refugee children, children with existing mental health issues, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, care leavers, and children at risk of sexual or criminal exploitation have also been identified by the Government as being potentially vulnerable to the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak. Young people in prisons and secure units are also at increased risk.

The Government has issued guidance relating to children and young people during the Covid-19 outbreak to Local Authorities, educational establishments and parents/carers. Guidance is also provided about specific topics such as provision of education and social care and some social care requirements have been temporarily suspended or relaxed. Updates of Government guidance, NHS information, and shared learning from Local Authorities is collated daily by the Association of Directors of Children's Services.

What impact is Covid-19 having on children and young people's safety?

The Children's Society notes "the coronavirus pandemic has disrupted the life of every child in the country. It is not only an unprecedented public health emergency, but also a challenge our society and our economy have not seen in peacetime".

Children and young people face increased risks during the Covid-19 outbreak including:

- risk in the home environment – living in close confinement during lockdown, especially if indoor space is limited, may aggravate existing issues, such as domestic abuse. Adult caregivers may respond to stressful living conditions by increased and problematic use of alcohol and drugs which in turn affects their ability to provide a safe home for the child. Children whose parents suffer poor mental health may be at additional risk.
- the possibility of more time spent online (where access to broadband connection, devices and space permit) with increased risk of exposure to criminal or sexual online exploitation, especially if parental oversight is lacking.
- increase in existing psychological health conditions caused by anxiety and stress about the Covid-19 outbreak, resulting in poorer mental health and wellbeing and risk of longer-term negative health effects.
- deprivation associated with poverty as families who were already struggling before the pandemic face additional costs, particularly if there is also a reduction in income, loss of paid employment, or delays in receiving benefits.
- reduced access to professionals (such as social workers) as services are run with fewer staff and capacity is limited. Looked after children and care leavers are especially at risk, as are young people living in unregulated care settings.

- limited access by children and young people to protective factors such as attending school and after school/out of school activities, and availability of community-based networks and resources. Children’s ‘visibility’ to adults outside the immediate household is likely to be limited and there will be fewer chances for adults to spot emerging problems or identify potential safeguarding concerns.

What are children telling us about how Covid-19 is affecting them?

In counselling sessions run by the NSPCC, children’s main fears about the outbreak centred on worries about mental health, family relationships, school work, bullying (less so since access to educational establishments was reduced) and abuse.

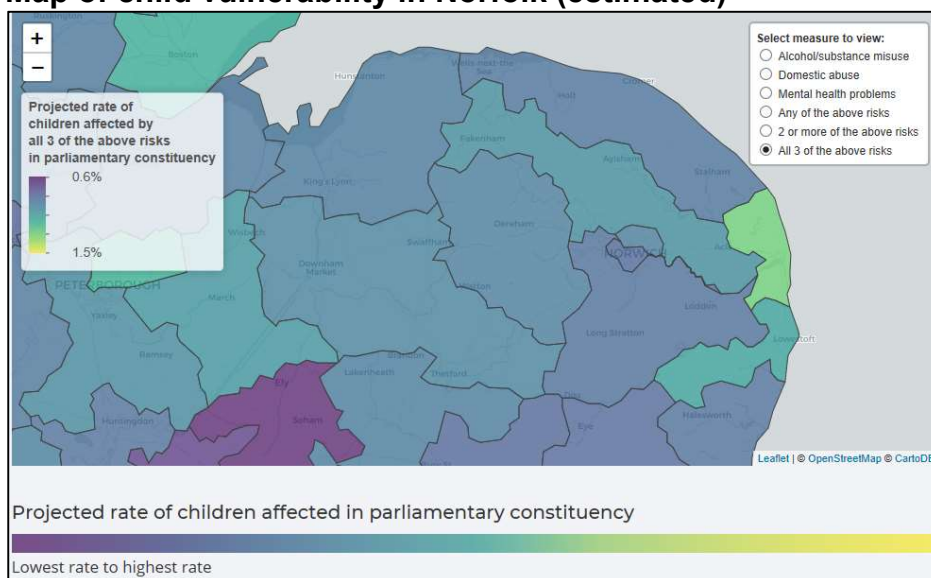
Children’s lived experiences of being in lockdown have been collected by the Children’s Commissioner for England and show that children are concerned about their families and are missing their friends.

Are things any different in Norfolk?

There seems to be no evidence to date which suggests that children and young people in Norfolk are experiencing the effects of Covid-19 differently to their peers.

The Children’s Commissioner for England local area profile of child vulnerability for Norfolk gives an estimate of the number of vulnerable children who have underlying or known needs. For example, almost 30,000 children are estimated to live in households where parental domestic abuse, substance misuse or mental health issues (the ‘toxic trio’) is present (see map below and tables on next page).¹ Children and young people with underlying or known needs may be disproportionately affected by Covid-19.

Map of child vulnerability in Norfolk (estimated)



<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/our-work/vulnerable-children/children-in-families-at-risk-local-area-maps/>

¹ Figures are estimates based on national datasets: for more information on sources and methods of calculating figures please see The Children’s Commission for England ‘We’re all in this together?’ (25 April 2020) <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/publication/were-all-in-this-together/> Figures in tables will be updated with Children’s Services data as soon as it is available.

Estimated prevalence of underlying needs among children in Norfolk		
Group	Indicator	Estimate
Children in at risk households with multiple vulnerabilities	Modelled prevalence of children in households with any of so called 'toxic trio'	29,430
Children in households suffering domestic abuse	Modelled prevalence of children in households where parent suffering DA	10,770
Children in households suffering from mental health problems	Modelled prevalence of children in households where parent suffering severe mental health problem	21,560
Children in households suffering from drug/alcohol problems	Modelled prevalence of children in households where parent suffering alcohol/drug dependency	6,860
Children in poverty	Children eligible for free school meals	16,172
	Households with children claiming universal credit	12,526
Children without internet access	Children in households where no home broadband above 2mbps is available	733
Profile of vulnerable children known to services in Norfolk		
Group	Indicator	Estimate
Children in households suffering domestic abuse	CIN episodes where a child has domestic abuse identified as a factor at CIN assessment (excluding LAC)	2,018
Children in households suffering from mental health problems	CIN episodes where a child has mental health of parent/someone else in household identified as a factor at CIN assessment (excluding LAC)	2,091
Children in households suffering from drug/alcohol problems	CIN episodes where a child has substance misuse by a parent/someone else in household identified as a factor at CIN assessment (excluding LAC)	1,276
Children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness	Total number of children in temporary accommodation	214
Children on the edge of social care involvement	Children referred to social services in last year but not meeting thresholds	2,482

Responses to the Covid-19 outbreak reflect local strengths and existing partnerships. The response in Norfolk includes changes to the way education and social care is delivered, campaigns ('See Something, Hear Something, Say Something') with partners about child safety, and the introduction of a new phone service and extended texting service (ChatHealth). National campaigns relevant to children such as the Home Office's domestic abuse awareness campaign #YouAreNotAlone have also been rolled out locally.

National children's charities have warned of a potential increase in child protection concerns and a rise in domestic abuse as a result of the Covid-19 outbreak: however, the LGA has reported that some councils are seeing a decline of up to 50% in referrals of vulnerable children despite a spike in domestic abuse reporting during the lockdown. It is possible that once lockdown is lifted evidence of unsafe situations will emerge creating a surge in demand for support from Children's Services.

Sources

Association of Directors of Children's Services: Covid-19 updates

<https://adcs.org.uk/health/article/coronavirus>

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<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/cco-briefing-children-domestic-abuse-coronavirus.pdf>

Children's Commissioner for England: 'Lockdown Experiences: what life is like in isolation' (21 April 2020)

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/04/21/lockdown-experiences-what-being-in-isolation-has-been-like-for-children/>

Children's Commissioner for England: 'We're all in this together?' (25 April 2020)

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Children's Commissioner for England: Statement on changes to regulations affecting children's social care (30 April 2020)

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/04/30/statement-on-changes-to-regulations-affecting-childrens-social-care/>

The Children's Society: 'The impact of Covid-19 on children'

<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/cv-19-impact-on-children-report-from-the-childrens-society.pdf>

Government guidance: 'Covid-19: Guidance for parents and carers on supporting children and young people's mental health and wellbeing during the Coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak' (29 March 2020)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-supporting-children-and-young-peoples-mental-health-and-wellbeing>

Government guidance 'Coronavirus (Covid-19): Guidance for Local Authorities on children's social care' (3 April 2020)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-childrens-social-care-services/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-local-authorities-on-childrens-social-care>

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The Guardian: Coronavirus puts vulnerable UK children at greater risk, campaigners warn (25 March 2020)

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/25/coronavirus-puts-vulnerable-uk-children-greater-risk-campaigners-warn>

The Guardian: 'Coronavirus will cause child poverty to soar. So what can we do about it?' (15 April 2020)

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/15/coronavirus-child-poverty-politicians-parents>

Local Government Information Unit: 'Councils' concern for at-risk children during lockdown' (28 April 2020)

<https://lgiu.org/daily-news/>

NSPCC: 'What children are saying to Childline about Coronavirus' (17 April 2020)

<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/2195/what-children-are-saying-to-childline-about-coronavirus.pdf>

Norfolk County Council <https://www.norfolk.gov.uk/news/2020/04/new-phone-services-to-help-protect-norfolks-children-and-young-people>

Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE): Safeguarding Children and Families during the Covid-19 outbreak (27 April 2020)

<https://www.scie.org.uk/care-providers/coronavirus-covid-19/safeguarding/children>