

The impact of Covid-19 on child carers in the UK

There are an estimated 700,000 young carers in the UK. These children already face huge responsibilities within their family and are at a higher risk of mental ill-health and lower educational attainment than their peers. Due to the nature of caring, it is likely that many of these children will be looking after a relative who is vulnerable to Covid-19. The lockdown and resulting economic downturn puts these children and their families at increased risk of vulnerability, including to exploitation and abuse, and makes it more difficult for them to realise their human rights.

Mental health impact

Research on mental health in the general population found that anxiety and depression spiked following the lockdown announcement in late March.ⁱ Child carers are already at heightened risk of low self-esteem, anxiety and depression, so may be considered extremely vulnerable to worsening mental health at this time.

Research on carers' experiences,ⁱⁱ conducted in the early stages of the UK lockdown, found high levels of anxiety amongst carers:

"The walls are closing in."

"My biggest fear, because she has mixed dementia, is that by the time it is all lifted, my Mum will have forgotten me."

The mental pressure of isolation, not being able to see friends or go outside for a "breather", plus the stress of supporting a family's everyday needs in difficult circumstances will inevitably increase during the lockdown period. This may be compounded if household income is reduced during or following the lockdown due to underemployment or austerity measures.

Food and other essential goods

In theory, supermarket delivery slots have been reserved for the most vulnerable. However, *The Guardian* newspaper found that "large numbers of disabled and older people are being excluded from the scheme due to the highly selective criteria".ⁱⁱⁱ The criteria also excludes many children with disabilities. Delivery services also rely on access to the internet, email and a credit or debit card, which young carers may not have. There are also penalties for shopping for fewer items, plus delivery costs, which increases the overall costs of online shopping. Poorer families are less likely to have been able to "stockpile" essentials at the start of the outbreak, and may have subsequently struggled to buy basic goods. These issues are compounded for child carers, who are already more likely to experience poverty than other children.^{iv}

Shopping for food and other essentials in person has become more difficult and time-consuming, with many smaller shops closed and long queues for supermarkets. Many essential items are still hard to find, necessitating trips to several shops, especially for people with special dietary or health needs. Child carers shopping on behalf of their families are more likely to walk rather than drive to the shops and be able to carry less in each trip. Families on low incomes are disadvantaged by the rising cost of some items and the need to shop frequently for smaller amounts of goods. Children may be afraid of leaving the house to shop in case they contract the virus and become ill themselves, or pass it to vulnerable members of their household.

Similar issues are apparent in accessing banks, post offices, pharmacies and other essential services, many of which have also reduced their hours. Food banks have struggled to keep stock-levels high enough to support families in crisis.

Some interviewees in the Mobilise research noted the practical and emotional support they were receiving from their local community. However, this is ad hoc and, for most, cannot be counted on as a long-term solution. Due to stigma, fear, or lack of social networks, child carers may be less likely or able to seek practical support within the community.

Accessing healthcare

Despite government assurances that the NHS is still open for business, fear of contracting Covid-19 appears to be keeping people away from hospitals. Child carers face a difficult decision if they see a decline in the health of a relative, which may be compounded by long NHS 111 waiting times and the unavailability of face-to-face GP services. It is a lot to expect children to navigate new systems and technologies for accessing healthcare while weighing up complex and fast-changing medical advice, and make reasoned decisions about the healthcare of adults and siblings. This responsibility is likely to put enormous strain on the mental health of the child carer, as well as putting the health and wellbeing of their family members at risk.

Education

Child carers' education already suffers because of their caring responsibilities. Child carers miss an average of 48 days of school and may struggle to find time to concentrate on homework.^v During the lockdown, parents have been expected to "home-school" their children; yet this may be impossible for the parents of child carers. In the absence of a parent or teacher to guide them, these children may see a further decline in their ability to learn. This will be compounded by additional stresses and highly time-consuming activities such as shopping for essentials (see above), brought on by the circumstances of the lockdown. In this way, child carers face a double-hit in terms of access to education.

Vulnerabilities

Child carers tend to be highly competent, organised and capable people, often as a result of the skills they have acquired from their caring responsibilities. However, this does not preclude them from having other characteristics that may compound the difficulties they face. Child carers may also have mental or physical disabilities, be refugees or members of minority groups, experience child poverty or be the victims of exploitation or abuse.

Indeed, some of these characteristics may be exacerbated by the lockdown itself. Children who are driven further into poverty, mental ill-health and isolation by the lockdown situation may become more vulnerable to situations of exploitation and abuse. In the worst cases, these situations can manifest as sexual and economic exploitation, including forced criminality, which have serious long-term effects on the health and wellbeing of the child.

It is important to consider these intersecting sources of vulnerability when considering the impact of Covid-19 on child carers. Being forced by the lockdown to stay away from school, friends and the community at large may mean that children who are at risk may not be seen and offered support. Above all, despite their capabilities, they must still be considered as children, with all the rights and protections due to those under the age of 18.

ⁱ Psychological survey of 2,000 people conducted between Monday 23 March and Friday 27 March 2020 by University of Sheffield and Ulster University: <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/news/2020/march/depression-and-anxiety-spiked-after-lockdown-announcement,-coronavirus-mental-health-study-shows>

ⁱⁱ Research into carers' experiences conducted by Mobilise and the Universities of Liverpool and Sheffield. Ages of carers not specified: <https://news.liverpool.ac.uk/2020/04/16/research-highlights-challenges-faced-by-carers-during-covid-19-lockdown/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ryan, F. (2020) Disabled people left off coronavirus vulnerable list go without food (19 April 2020). *The Guardian*: www.theguardian.com/society/2020/apr/19/disabled-people-left-off-coronavirus-vulnerable-list-go-without-food

^{iv} Vizard, P., Obolenskaya, P. & Burchardt, T. (2019) Child poverty amongst young carers in the UK: prevalence and trends in the wake of the financial crisis, economic downturn and onset of austerity. *Child Indicators Research*, 12, 1831–1854: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12187-018-9608-6>

^v Young Minds: youngminds.org.uk/find-help/looking-after-yourself/young-carers/