

**Effects of the Covid-19 lockdown on children's mental health in the UK**

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| <b>Module:</b>          | <b>Introduction to Research</b>         |
| <b>Assignment:</b>      | <b>Assessment 1: Written Assignment</b> |
| <b>Module Code:</b>     | <b>BMHP5005_LON</b>                     |
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| <b>Submission Date:</b> | <b>5<sup>th</sup> May 2022</b>          |
| <b>Wordcount:</b>       | <b>3,591</b>                            |

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# **1. Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to explore how the mental health of children and young people changed during the lockdown in the UK. The objective is to provide a systematic review of primary collated data studies by examining the effects on children and young people's mental health for policies and practices to adhere to the findings of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The unprecedented coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) spread rapidly causing a health threat globally, creating a strain on the health systems around the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has had a serious impact on children's mental health by causing unpredictable disruption, taking them out of their daily school routines, unsettling their social lives, and hindering their emotional and cognitive development due to not knowing the length of time they would be in lockdown. Not only were they socially isolating, but many were having to deal with the bereavement of loved ones, dealing with the illness or trying to avoid it themselves, putting them at a socioeconomic disadvantage. The majority of children and young adults felt anxious and struggled to manage back in a pressurised and busy school environment (Jeffreys, 2022). This has resulted in increasing risk factors for mental health disorders including an intense rising in anxiety levels (Bunn and Lewis, 2021).

# **2. Background**

Research shows mental health and well-being of children and young people have been adversely affected during the pandemic. During the first period of lockdown, between March and June 2020, while children were at home, data suggests children and young people between the ages of 7.5-12 years were found to suffer increasingly from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Parents and caregivers reported an overall rise in mental health problems among their children during this time. Well-being was also indicated to be lower during December 2020 and February 2021, during school closure periods (GOV.UK, 2021). The Department for Education's (DfE's) State of the Nation annual report showed an increase in mental disorders for children and young people between 2017 and 2021 from 11.6% to 17.4% for 6 –16-year-olds (NHS Digital, 2021).

## Referrals to children and young people's mental health services on the rise

April 2017 to October 2021, England



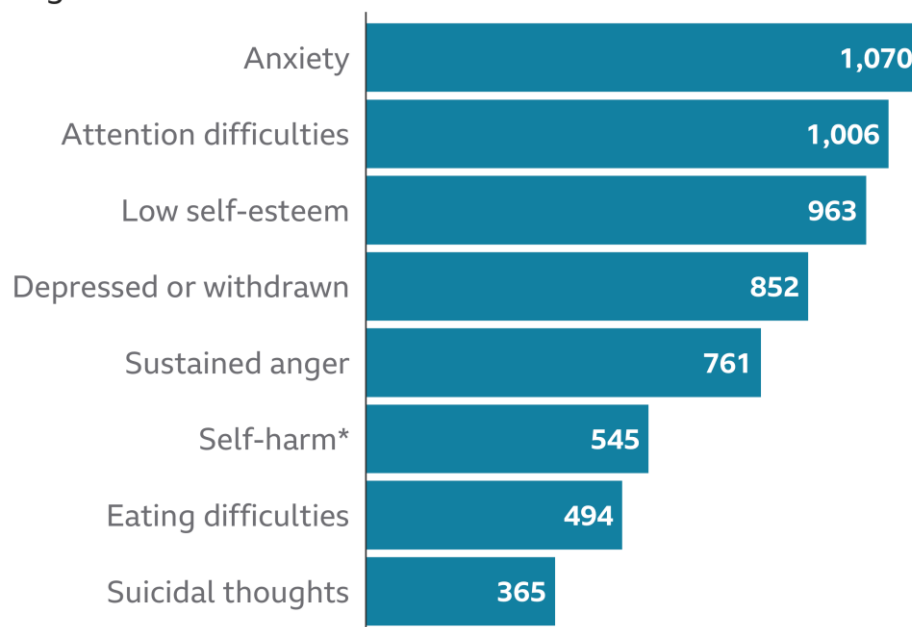
Source: NHS Digital

**BBC** (Jeffreys, 2022)

According to data analysis for the BBC, between April and October 2021 there was a 77% increase in referrals for children and young adults under the age of 18, needing NHS treatment for severe mental health issues such as self-harm and suicidal thoughts. Over 1,000 teaching and support staff witnessed a surge in mental health issues, through survey responses from children's mental health charity Place2Be and the National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT), the highest seen increase was students suffering from anxiety. Pre-pandemic counsellors were seeing approximately 100 children over the school year, after returning from lockdown counsellors recorded to be seeing 100 children per term. Through this recognition, the government injected £79 million to support schools by announcing plans for 400 mental health teams to support schools by offering students counselling by 2023. Identified immediate risks that 230, 591 under 18s were found to be facing were eating disorders, self-harm and suicidal thoughts in 2019. By the end of October 2021, the highest number of referrals plummeted to 349,449 under 18s who connected with the child and adolescent psychiatric teams (Jeffreys, 2022).

## Almost all staff surveyed saw increases in mental health problems among pupils

Number of staff who said they had seen a substantial or slight increase since the start of the autumn term



\*Self-harm/self-destructive thoughts or acts

Survey of 1,130 teaching and support staff conducted in January 2022

Source: NAHT, Place2Be

**BBC** (Jeffreys, 2022)

Evidence shows children and young people have been mentally effected due to the Covid-19 lockdown. It is important to explore and examine to what extent, and in what ways, the effects on children's and young people's mental health have been impacted. To help put forward recommendations to improve policies and practices for our future generation.

## 3. Methods

### 3a. Search Strategy

The search strategy used to conduct this research was through a systematic literature review. The purpose of this explicit method is to build upon a foundation for research and is applied to systematically review literature which is relevant to the chosen topic through a thorough and systematic process to produce reliably concise results. The systematic process helps search for relevant literature using specific search engines and focuses on filtering what is relevant according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria inputted. By following this methodology, it demonstrates clearly what is trying to be achieved, why and to reduce bias. This is undertaken to help widen understanding of the field of study, through identifying, evaluating and synthesising what research has already been done on the topic by previous researchers and explore what the limitations are to help reach the aims and

objectives of research. Providing auditability is a vital factor of the systematic review method as it helps keep record of the process of the strategies undertaken so others can follow the same system to ensure accuracy, consistency and validity of findings throughout the review process (McRae, 2022).

A systematic search was conducted by using keywords: Children, Young People, Mental Health, Well-being, Depression, Anxiety, Lockdown OR Coronavirus OR Covid-19, United Kingdom OR UK. The search terms used were found on databases: PubMed, UWTSD Library, ProQuest, and Google Scholar to identify further and relevant studies. The Inclusion Criteria that were screened were by looking at articles between 2019-2022, as the pandemic started in 2019, only relevant academic journal articles based on primary research, and peer-reviewed in English and based in the UK, related to children, young people or adolescents. Articles identified were screened as abstracts. After excluding the criteria of articles conducted outside the UK and published in other languages, that did not meet the inclusion criteria, the full texts of the remaining articles were assessed for eligibility and decisions were made regarding their final inclusion in the review.

### **3b. Data Analysis**

The aim of qualitative data analysis is to identify, examine, and interpret patterns and themes in textual data to help answer the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Therefore, for qualitative and research to be credible, data analysis is essential. Identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data is the process of thematic analysis (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017).

In this systematic literature review a thematic analysis was conducted within qualitative data to examine the primary research and identify the key themes of how Covid-19 lockdown has affected children and young people through the increased challenges in mental health and well-being caused by anxiety, fear and stress. The lack of connection between families, friends and trusted adults due to isolation increased the exposure to detrimental effects like suicidal thoughts, self-harm and eating disorders as basic needs for those facing financial hardships were not being fulfilled (BBC Children in Need, 2020).

### **3c. Ethical Considerations**

It is vital for a code of ethics to be considered when ethical research is being conducted for a research project. While conducting research it is important that the research articles are being used ethically, for example not plagiarising any work, always use citations and correct referencing and ensure all research is credible. No personal data of participants should be published, and the researcher must ensure the participants are protected from any harm and

not endure any stressful issues (Cacciattolo, 2015). According to Major and Savin-Baden (2010) during a systematic literature review it is the researcher's duty to be ethically aware of presenting accurate evidence from primary research (Major and Savin-Baden, 2010). These are all the main fields of ethical considerations which were considered while conducting the systematic literature review and all methods were carried out according to the university's relevant guidance to ensure regulations were adhered to.

## **4. Results**

Three primary studies were carefully selected after searching systematically using the mentioned search engines and search criteria in the methodology. The studies were found and rigorously analysed according to the aim and themes of the research topic.

### **4a. Aims and Characteristics of the Selected Studies**

The first research article published in April 2021, aimed to explore how children and young adults' mental health developed throughout a full month of the Covid-19 lockdown in the UK. Primary research on a sample size of 2,673 participants on school-aged children from 4–16-year-olds' parents in the UK filled out an online survey regarding their child's mental health at two separate intervals between March 2020- May 2020. They recorded emotional patterns, changes in conduct, lack of focus, mostly due to hyperactivity (Waite et al., 2021).

The second study published in July 2021, assessed the impact on children's mental health to help improve public health policies and practices to support children after the Covid-19 pandemic. Before lockdown began, mental health assessments were taken from April 2020 and continued until June 2020 on 168 children 7.6 years old to 11.6 years old. Self-reports, parents-reports, and teachers reports were provided to help produce the results (Bignardi et al., 2021).

The third final research article published in February 2022, aimed to show the positive effects of children's mental health and wellbeing during the Covid-19 lockdown. A sample size of 22,336 students were invited to complete the survey ranging from primary school until college age. Out of which, 16, 940 participants answered the questions about their well-being changes for the final sample during the first lockdown. Students, parents, teachers, and healthcare professionals answered the survey (Soneson et al., 2022).

### **4b. Thematic Analysis of the Studies**

The first article helped establish who and how they were affected to be able to ensure appropriate support could be provided. The results show there has been a significant negative impact on children's and young people's mental health and well-being in the UK due to lack of face-to-face teaching support, social interaction and no outdoor leisure

activities. According to the key themes, this article showed an increase in anxiety and fear, due to lockdown isolation (Waite et al., 2021).

The second was a longitudinal study, which measured an increase of children becoming depressed against The Revised Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS). There was a substantial rise in children's symptoms of becoming depressed, at a medium to large rate. According to the key themes, there were little changes in children's anxiety scales or emotional problems, however a key theme of depression was identified from this study (Bignardi et al., 2020).

The third article's main findings through a descriptive analysis showed one third of an improvement in the students' well-being during the Covid-19 lockdown along with one third recorded as showing they felt no changes, along with the final one third responses recorded as their mental health deteriorating, as the key theme identified in this study. Findings showed the first lockdown resulted in a proportion of students feeling happier due to lockdown, this could be as at first during the first lockdown children felt like it was a holiday (Soneson et al., 2022).

The common aims were to explore the effects of Covid-19 lockdown on children's and young people's mental health and key themes of all three studies were overall the same. These were identified as: anxiety, depression and mental health deterioration due to the lack of interaction with peers, trusted adults and family members.

## **5. Discussion**

The research of these studies helped set out to explore how mental health symptoms affected children and young people during the Covid-19 lockdown in the UK. Throughout this systematic literature review of all three articles thematically it has come to light that children and young people's mental health has been affected adversely due to the Covid-19 lockdown. The findings overall highlighted a deterioration of mental health in children. Pre-adolescent children showed a particular deterioration in mental health symptoms, resulting in an increase in emotional symptoms by 10%, an increase in hyperactivity/inattention by 20%, and an increase in conduct problems by 35% (Waite et al., 2021). The data also showed that children's depression increased significantly during the lockdown in the UK, however this was highly unusual in children of this age before the lockdown (Bignardi et al., 2020). 33.2% of students showed their mental health had improved during lockdown, in comparison with 32.9% who stated they didn't feel there was any difference, while at a slightly higher rate of 33.9% reported that they felt their mental wellbeing had deteriorated during lockdown (Soneson et al., 2022).

This evidence suggests the reason why preadolescents were affected more was due to the fact they were more dependent on their parents for help with their work, had no peers to interact with and they weren't allowed to play outdoors. Whereas adolescents were likely to be interacting with their peers through social media and mobile phones, therefore were not as highly affected in comparison.

Overall, 5,743 adolescents showed they were unhappy during lockdown, this is quite a significant sample size, in comparison with both other studies sample sizes. Which makes the findings inconclusive as the other studies sample sizes are very small in comparison. Whereas within this study alone showing the adolescents were slightly unhappier in comparison to happier was only a slight difference. However, overall, another study could be made with equal sample sizes of different age groups and reasons why the children and young people were unhappy would need to be investigated.

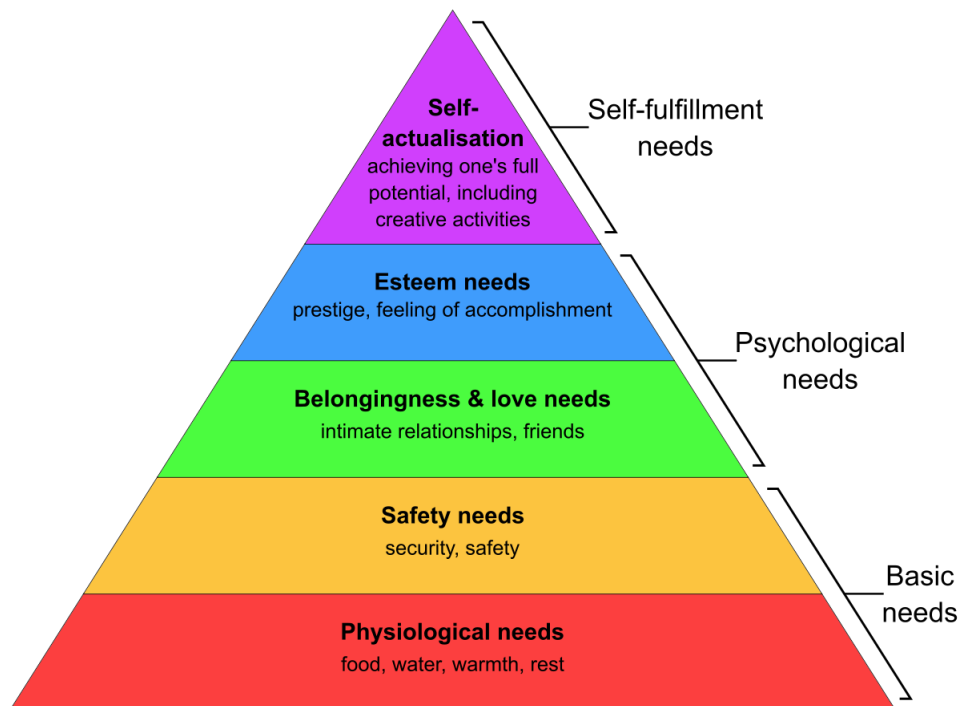
Even though the results are inconclusive, every child has the right to happiness, as in the UK 'Every child matters.' This is a government initiative introduced in 2003, to show the importance of investing in prevention and early intervention to ensure each child is valued highly (Department for Education, 2003). From this data analysis public health policies and practices can be improved and updated to support children and young people not only in school settings, but within health and social care provisions as well. Research shows there is a higher risk of adverse effects on mental health on people from a socioeconomic disadvantaged background (Bunn and Lewis, 2021).

All the articles research were conducted on a wide age-range of children and young people, mostly from ages 6-18. This is quite a large age-range, and many factors vary due to these as different aged children suffer from different types of issues in comparison to young people. However, across the board all ages suffered from anxiety. The studies were ambiguous and unclear as to why the children's and young people's mental health patterns changed. All the articles researched were based on the period of early lockdowns only, research on later lockdowns were currently unavailable. Therefore, further research could be conducted on later lockdowns, and on the aftermath of lockdowns to monitor children's and young people's mental well-being.

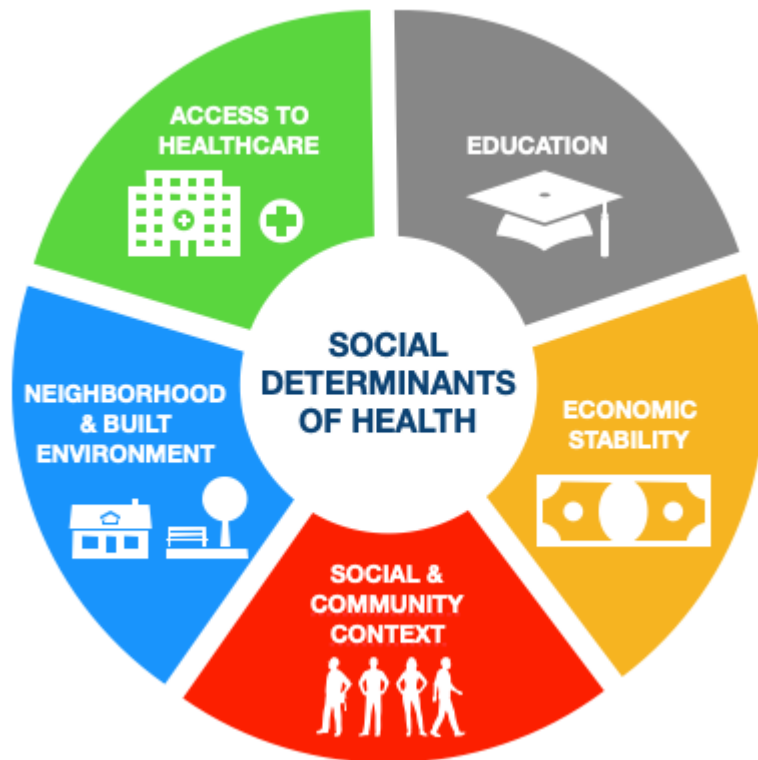
## **5a. Recommendations for Future Policy and Health and Social Care Practice**

Long term lockdown cannot be sustained for too long in any country as it is a high risk to the population's health and well-being. Policymakers, need to understand this risk and how Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the social determinants of health can guide whole-society

policy. To manage the crisis, decisions must be aligned with societal needs. For a successful recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, an evidence-based approach is needed now to ensure community stability and sustainability. Maslow's theory provides a framework for understanding the impact on society through motivation. The basic needs are the physiological needs for the foundation: water food, shelter, then the next level of safety and security is achieved once the basic level is achieved etc. However, due to Covid-19 lockdown children and young people can't achieve the first level due to not being able to attend school therefore the next levels of self-esteem and self-actualisation cannot be fulfilled. Also, due to parents losing employment, and cost of living rising, again children's basic needs are being compromised. It is imperative for policymakers to integrate Maslow's hierarchy of needs into current policy along with the social determinants of health, as this will ensure the approach is based on society's needs, otherwise long-term harm and instability will cause whole-society COVID-19 crises (Ryan et al., 2020).



(Contributors to Wikimedia projects, 2013)



(Sunshine Community Health Center, 2019)

Once the correct and specific age-range sample of children have been investigated, public policies should be put into place to protect the children and support them by offering a parenting course and family therapy, also, free activities through the local authority to be able to help the family reconnect again and help boost the children's self-esteem and confidence again (Mental Health Foundation, 2022).

This evidence shows further research should be conducted to establish which children are at highest risk for poor mental health issues and to find out if any further underlying factors could be a cause. As a result of the significant rise in mental health, it is important to investigate how much of a long-lasting negative effect there is on the affected children to be able to monitor how long this could continue for and to help support them with the correct services to aid them to recovery (Millar et al., 2022).

After being identified, to help support the children's recovery, they should be referred to appropriate interventions within the school, such as social skills groups, assess their education gaps and put into booster programmes, as they may be feeling down due to lack of understanding school-work, if they are severely withdrawn they should be referred to the school nurse, the GP, and if any signs of abuse or neglect arise the educational welfare officer and social services referral should be made.

## **5b. Importance of the findings for Health and Social Care**

It is empirical early detection of deterioration of mental health is picked up by healthcare professionals to combat and support the decline of mental health in children and young adults to prevent long term effects of harm. Health and social care professionals need an evidence-based approach to be able to help identify who is most at risk, and how, to ensure they can be supported by enjoying their rights in full and help build a better future.

A campaign called OutRight 2021-22 was launched last year by UNICEF UK to help empower children and young people to understand their rights and help others too by speaking about rights for all children. UNICEF UK helps over 2 million children every year by working with schools, hospitals and local authorities (UNICEF UK, 2021).

A total of £11.5 million is currently being funded by BBC Children in Need for 150 projects supporting children and young people facing mental health challenges. There are over 300 counselling projects worth £25.4 million supporting children and young people suffering from mental health issues and other issues such as trauma and distress. There are more than 1,400 projects worth over £88.2 million aimed at improving the emotional well-being of children and young people (BBC Children in Need, 2020).

Researchers also developed a Loneliness Toolkit to determine if a child or young person felt lonely and tackle the issue through interventions that can help them by increasing awareness, challenging misconceptions, increasing resilience, and reducing the stigma associated with loneliness (Mental Health, 2021).

By understanding the findings of research healthcare professionals and charities can help support people who are suffering from mental health issues. If the government recognise there is a need for support within children and young people, they will also address the issues better and ensure children's rights remain a priority through providing more funding towards charities, the NHS, employing more counsellors and providing them more widely to children and young adults and of course by creating more assessment platforms for all children to be able to be identified who are suffering.

## **5c. Limitations**

The sample size in the studies were variable, but one of the studies were quite small in comparison to the other two. The studies sample size data collections were limited to one place E.g. One school. Younger children suffer from mental health in different ways to young people. Therefore, primary research on small-grouped age groups could have provided more specific data for future findings. The assessments that were carried out were quite ambiguous, if further research was to be conducted in the future, clearer factors should be

discussed and considered in questionnaires and assessments, such as parent's occupations, exams stress, if the family is from a deprived socioeconomic background as possible factor causes of mental health issues.

Also, the research was limited to showing effects on mental health issues in comparison to deeper issues which may have been experienced, such as suicidal thoughts, self-harming and eating disorders, none of the studies explored these issues in greater depth. However, 409,347 under-18s were referred to the NHS in England for specialist care for issues such as suicidal thoughts and self-harm between April and October 2021 (Jeffreys, 2022).

The articles also do not consider that the participants may already have been suffering from mental health issues pre-covid, therefore, this could be a factor affecting the results. As research shows this has been an even more difficult time for children with existing mental health conditions (BBC Children in Need, 2020).

## **6. Conclusion**

It is apparent depression has increased significantly in comparison to before lockdown, this is mostly due to school closures, park closures, travel restrictions, staying at home and not visiting family and friends, also, including leisure centres and martial arts schools being shut down.

As reported by BBC Children in Need (2020), children, young people and families are extremely anxious about the future, including education transitions, instabilities within families by job losses or threats to future employment, and financial stability. All these factors increase stress within the family, which causes upset within children as it affects them too (BBC Children in Need, 2020).

By conducting a systematic review of primary collated data studies on an examination of changes in children's mental health, recommendations for policies and practices should be introduced to eradicate the negative effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and be able to support the children as a high priority as they are the worlds future generation.

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