

CONTEXT OF COVID-19 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN

Submitted by the Child Witness Institute

KEY CONCEPTS	
Covid-19	Implications of Covid for children
Impact of Covid-19	Violence against children
Online exploitation	

INTRODUCTION

The Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has, since the first infections came to light in China at the end of 2019, continued to spread rampantly across the world. No continent has escaped the virus and only a handful of countries at the time of writing have recorded no reported cases of the virus. Globally the recorded average mortality rate of COVID-19 has been estimated by the World Health Organisation to be around 3,4%. It would be pointless to list the number of infections and the number of deaths caused by this virus as these numbers increase by the thousands daily. Declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on March 11th 2020, COVID-19 has become a global emergency as a result of its impact on the entire world population and its economy.

Governments have responded swiftly to stem the tide of the virus with the majority of countries around the world having introduced measures like quarantine, self-isolation and lockdowns. There has been the closure of international and internal travel, bans on social gatherings, closure of bars and restaurants, the closing of schools, suspension of public or religious gatherings, reduction in transport and very reduced retail services. Lockdowns have been implemented in most countries and they vary from the more lenient versions, where people are requested to remain at home and work from home where possible, to more draconian versions where people are forced to remain at home and only allowed to leave for emergency reasons, like food or medical care and businesses and schools are closed. This has resulted in more than half of the world's population being confined to their homes.

School and business closures, movement restrictions and isolation measures will have a profound impact on everyone, and even more so on those who are already vulnerable¹.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SOCIETY

The COVID-19 pandemic sweeping throughout the world has severe implications for humanity since it will impact in various ways on the economic, social, health, environmental and technological spheres of society. Those factors that will have specific impact on children are highlighted below:

Economic implications

According to the World Bank,² global poverty is likely to increase dramatically with estimates suggesting that COVID-19 will push 49 million people into extreme poverty in 2020 and 100 million into poverty. In many areas of the world, high levels of poverty will be exacerbated by the

¹ Plan International. 2020. **Living under Lockdown: Girls and COVID-19.**

² <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/impact-covid-19-coronavirus-global-poverty-why-sub-saharan-africa-might-be-region-hardest> (accessed 6 may 2020).

lockdown strategies that have been implemented worldwide. Lockdowns mean no economic activity and, consequently, no opportunities to earn an income. Although this will have a devastating effect on those who are self-employed or are part of the informal sector, the impact will also be felt by employees in larger companies that will not be able to survive the economic collapse³. Many have been forced to take unpaid leave and retrenchments are on the horizon.

Governments have also been under tremendous financial pressure to redirect funding to implement measures that will respond to and combat the Coronavirus. Expenditure to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 has focused on the acquisition of testing equipment, improving and extending hospital facilities, contact-tracing and enforcing lockdown restrictions. In addition, social grants and food assistance have been introduced to assist those experiencing the harshest impact, and the homeless have had to be relocated and cared for.⁴ In essence, the emergency situation has caused all finances to be redirected to combat the spread of the virus, with the implication that there will be less funding for social support and safeguarding activities.

Social implications

Although restrictions vary from country to country, government-mandated lockdowns have restricted the movement of the majority of people by requiring them to remain indoors unless they are seeking medical attention or buying food. Schools have been closed and social (physical) distancing policies have been introduced, which have led to the suspension of all religious gatherings and social-cultural functions.⁵ In addition, in some countries, the sale of alcohol, cigarettes and tobacco have been prohibited to minimise intoxication and the conflicts that tend to emanate from its use.

Health implications

With 260 000 COVID-19 related deaths already to date and millions of deaths predicted to follow in the ensuing months, many families will be affected. On a more personal level, the use of masks, frequent hand washing, the avoidance of handshakes or body contact and the need to practise good personal hygiene have been recommended and even enforced in public places⁶.

Technological implications

There has been an increased use of technology in the period of lockdown and this has been used to obtain information as well as to connect socially with family and friends. Meetings are held online, using applications like Skype and Zoom, and social events are now also broadcast via this medium so that weddings and parties are now taking place online. Schools and universities are making use of online facilities to access students and offer their learning programmes. In a sense, all communication that used to take place face-to-face is now happening online.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 FOR CHILDREN

³ Sekyere, E., Bohler-Muller, N., Hongoro, C. and Makoae, M. April 2020. *The Impact of COVID-19 in South Africa*. African Program Occasional Paper. Wilson Center. 3.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid at 4.

The world has changed overnight and this will have implications, some very serious, for children everywhere. This is highlighted in the Call for Action by leaders,⁷ which succinctly sets out the problems facing children during and after this pandemic.

“A third of the global population is on COVID-19 lockdown, and school closures have impacted more than 1.5 billion children. Movement restrictions, loss of income, isolation, overcrowding and high levels of stress and anxiety are increasing the likelihood that children experience and observe physical, psychological and sexual abuse at home – particularly those children already living in violent or dysfunctional family situations. And while online communities have become central to maintain many children’s learning, support and play, it is also increasing their exposure to cyberbullying, risky online behaviour and sexual exploitation. The situation is aggravated by children’s lack of access to school friends, teachers, social workers and the safe space and services that schools provide. The most vulnerable children – including refugees, migrants, and children who are internally displaced, deprived of liberty, living without parental care, living on the street and in urban slums, with disabilities, and living in conflict-affected areas – are a particular concern. For many, growing economic vulnerability will increase the threat of child labour, child marriage and child trafficking.”

COVID-19 will expose children to increased protection risks through a number of pathways. Directly, this can occur as a result of a parent dying, being ill or being placed in quarantine which would place the child at heightened risk for violence, neglect or exploitation.⁸ The economic crisis may reduce the capacity of parents to care for children, which, in turn, will also increase their risk of being exposed to abuse and exploitation. Measures to address the pandemic have resulted in disruptions to children’s daily environments, routines and relationships. The isolation measures implemented have disrupted the reporting and referral mechanisms used to access assistance from child protection services, leaving children vulnerable to abuse.

There are unique factors about Covid-19 that make it particularly alarming for children. Because of the physical distancing and lockdown restrictions in place, children have a greater risk of experiencing violence at the hands of family and those living within their homes.⁹ The risks of experiencing violence within the home during times of crisis are often exacerbated by factors such as emotional stress, economic strain, and shifting roles and responsibilities among family members.¹⁰ These drivers of violence are likely to increase within the context of COVID-19 in view of the widespread job loss, disruption of routines, poverty and stress. When all these factors are combined with lockdowns and movement restrictions, homes can become “potential pressure cookers of GBV” while victims are unable to seek safety or other forms of support.¹¹ Children are also at an increased risk of being exposed to cyberbullying and online exploitation as a result of prolonged periods of online activity due to the lockdown. The closure of schools and economic strain places children at greater risk of exploitation, forcing them earlier into the labour market and leading to early and forced marriages. A recent analysis by UNFPA estimates that the closure of

⁷ End Violence Against Children. **Leaders call for action to protect children during COVID-19.** <https://www.end-violence.org/articles/leaders-call-action-protect-children-during-covid-19-now-7-languages> (accessed 12 May 2020).

⁸ UNICEF. April 2020. **Child protection and COVID-19.** <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/covid-19/#status> (accessed 14 May 2020).

⁹ CARE. May 2020. POLICY BRIEF : Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and COVID-19: The complexities of responding to “The Shadow Pandemic.” 4-5.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.5.

programmes due to COVID-19 may result in as many as 2 million additional cases of female genital mutilation and 13 million additional cases of child marriages.¹²

The reported increase in GBV since the start of the pandemic will also have a traumatic impact on children, either as recipients of the violence or as witnesses thereto. Reports of GBV have increased dramatically in many countries, despite the fact that existing pathways for accessing assistance have been disrupted, and response and support centres are less accessible. Countries like France have reported a 30% increase in reported cases of GBV since the start of the pandemic, 25% in Argentina and 33% in Singapore. Increased calls to helplines for reporting GBV incidents have been recorded in numerous countries, like the United States, Canada, Australia and the UK. In view of the above factors, UN Women has described this violence as a “shadow epidemic” occurring alongside COVID-19 throughout the world.¹³

The implications of covid-19 for parents

The impact of COVID-19 has had life-changing implications for the vast majority of the world’s population. Parents will, therefore, be experiencing any of the following consequences:

- Loss of employment
- Business collapse
- Increased debt
- Increased stress, tension and discord
- Confinement to home
- Death
- Social isolation

The implications of covid-19 for children

Any consequences of COVID-19 experienced by parents will have concomitant repercussions on children in their care. Children would thus be exposed to any of the following experiences:

- Hunger
- Fear and trauma
- Emotional abuse
- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Neglect
- Exploitation and child labour
- Social isolation

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

In order to understand the impact of COVID-19 on children, it is necessary to have an understanding of the violence experienced by children before COVID-19. The startling statistic is that one billion children experience some form of emotional, physical or sexual violence every year and one child dies from violence every five minutes.¹⁴ Ninety percent (90%) of children are abused by someone they know or trust and over 60% are abused within their own families by mothers, fathers, uncles, siblings, grandfathers and other extended family members.¹⁵

¹² Ibid.6.

¹³ Ibid.6.

¹⁴ United Nations. Children. <https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/children/index.html> (accessed 19 May 2010).

Although there is a variation between individual countries, data indicates that approximately two-thirds of children in sub-Saharan Africa suffer physical violence, a quarter emotional violence and a third of girls suffer sexual violence. Most of these children have experienced this violence recently and repeatedly. Most of the physical violence experienced by children is at the hands of their parents or teachers, while half of children are exposed to domestic violence.¹⁶

The following is a summary of the available data on the prevalence of violence experienced by children in Africa during the previous year:¹⁷

- half of all children will have suffered physical violence
- one in ten will have suffered sexual violence, and
- one in five will have suffered emotional violence.

The same study examined who the perpetrators of violence were and found that most physical violence was perpetrated by parents (and other adults in the family) and teachers. Most sexual violence happens in homes, at school and travelling to and from school, and most of that sexual violence takes place in either the victim's home or the perpetrator's home.¹⁸

Witnessing violence between family members can be as traumatic for children as experiencing the violence themselves. The above research found that over half of all children had witnessed physical violence against others in the home.¹⁹

This is a very brief overview of the context of violence that children experience. It is now necessary to examine how this situation will be impacted by COVID-19 and the responses that have been put in place by governments around the world to reduce the spread of the virus.

LOCKDOWN AT HOME

The most dangerous place for many children around the world is their own home, where they should be safest. Children face the biggest risks to their safety and security in the home environment.²⁰ As seen above, immediate family members are the most common perpetrators of all forms of abuse.²¹ This means that home is not necessarily the safest place for children to be. But with 91% of children around the world affected by school closures and many governments around the world imposing different versions of lockdown, children have been confined to their homes, which is not the safest place for a vast percentage of children to be. This will be further exacerbated by the fact that parents and family will have increased stress due to job loss and retrenchments, increased debt, and confinement, often in very close proximity to the children who are bored, frustrated and scared. The logic is that the number of children experiencing physical violence will increase dramatically over this period. From the research referred to earlier, it is clear that a very high percentage of sexual abuse of children occurs within the home environment. With lockdown restrictions in place, children will be confined within the home and at greater risk of being sexually abused.

¹⁵ National Association of Adult Survivors of Child Abuse. <http://www.nasca.org/2012-Resources/010812-StatisticsOfChildAbuse.htm> (accessed 19 May 2020).

¹⁶ Big Win Philanthropy. 2018. Violence against children: A review of evidence relevant to Africa on prevalence, impacts and prevention. 8.

¹⁷ Ibid. 10.

¹⁸ Ibid. 11-12.

¹⁹ Ibid. 12.

²⁰ World Vision. 2014. **Global views on violence against children.**9.

²¹ Ibid 6.

Lockdown and physical distancing will also be traumatic for children who are not exposed to abuse within their home and family environments. As jobs are lost and families lose sources of income, children's sense of security, safety and normalcy will be severely challenged. Children will have fears of family and friends catching or even dying from the virus, impacting on their mental health and psycho-social well-being.²²

CLOSURE OF SCHOOLS

Lockdown has seen the closure of schools all around the world with more than 1,5 billion children impacted by this. School closures due to COVID-19 have affected 91 percent of the world's students. Although schools are also places where children are exposed to violence, they do offer a comparatively protective and nurturing space for many children. This is particularly the case for children who are the most vulnerable learners, those who rely on school for food and their overall mental and physical health. School is also a very important entry point to prevent and address violence, not only by informing and providing children with information about abuse, but by being able to identify children who have been abused. It is also the only access many children have to report abuse that is taking place within their homes and to seek support and assistance.

To a lesser degree, the closure of schools will also have an impact on the social aspects of child development. Children are being deprived of the social interaction that they have with their fellow students and teachers, which is essential to their well-being, protection and the development of their socio-emotional skills. The abrupt withdrawal from friends, teachers and their normal environments will have an emotional and psychological impact on children.

ONLINE EXPLOITATION

With the closure of schools and the implementation of isolation measures and lockdowns, children will dramatically increase their use of the Internet for the purposes of both schooling and entertainment. Greater unsupervised Internet usage will expose children to a greater risk of sexual exploitation online. The current COVID-19 environment has exacerbated the existing drivers of online sexual abuse in the following ways:²³

- Isolation due to COVID-19 will provide offenders with greater opportunity to act on their impulses
- Economic hardship, as a result of the virus, is likely to increase the potential for live streaming abuse in home environments
- Children are spending more time online and are thus at increased risk
- The exchange of self-generated materials is also likely to increase as children are now experiencing most of their social lives only online
- COVID-19 restrictions are disrupting reporting services.

²² The World Economic Forum COVID Action Platform. May 2020. **COVID -19 is hurting children's mental health. Here are three ways we can help.** <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/covid-19-is-hurting-childrens-mental-health/> (accessed 21 May 2020).

²³ WePROTECT Global Alliance. May 2020. Intelligence Brief: Impact of COVID-19 on Online Sexual Exploitation. <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5630f48de4b00a75476ecf0a/t/5ebc58d038eb072b909874ca/1589401809129/Impact+of+COVID-19+on+Online+Child+Sexual+Exploitation.pdf>

Although it is still too early to have accurate quantitative and qualitative data available, reporting from stakeholders indicates that it is highly probable that numbers of online sexual abuse cases will increase:

- Specialist cyber security company, Web-IQ, recorded an increase of 200% in posts on known child sex abuse forums that link to downloadable images and videos hosted on the clearnet²⁴
- The India Child Protection Fund (ICPF) in India has registered an increase in online searches for child sexual abuse images since the beginning of lockdown²⁵
- The National Center for Missing and Exploited Children ((NCMEC) has registered a 106% increase in reports of suspected child sexual exploitation (983 734 reports in March 2019 to 2 027 520 in March 2020)²⁶
- There is also evidence that hotlines and portals are registering an increase in reporting. ECPAT Sweden has signalled a clear increase in reports of online child sexual abuse to several of their hotlines. INHOPE has stated that reports of child sexual exploitation activity to cyber tip hotlines are up by an average of 30% globally.²⁷

The following key risk factors for children have been identified during the COVID-19 pandemic:²⁸

- higher level of emotional vulnerability
Abusers tend to target children who have shown some form of vulnerability online. In the United Kingdom, Childline had by the end of March already delivered 900 sessions to children concerned about COVID-19 and, according to recent figures released by the Children's Commissioner for England, 88% of children interviewed felt extremely stressed. Children are worried about being isolated from their families and friends and they are concerned about catching or even dying from the virus. This increases the number of emotionally vulnerable children online. In addition, children may also be more inclined to share self-produced child sexual images with their own peers, increasing their vulnerability.
- lack of caregiver supervision
Since children have been restricted to their homes, they will be making greater use of the Internet. Parents will either have to go out to work or work from home, leaving children unsupervised for longer periods of time.
- offender risk factors
Offenders are more likely to offend when their lives are affected by a significant change, and COVID-19 could act as such a trigger factor, where stress due to the virus and possible job losses will create an impact. Data from the Lucy Faithfull Foundation have a section on their website that was created to assist those with concerns about their sexual behaviour towards children. This section has shown an increase of new users with the percentage increasing from 26% before lockdown to 64% after lockdown.

²⁴ Online Child Abuse Flourishes As Investigators Struggle With Workload During Pandemic. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/online-child-exploitation-flourishes-investigators-struggle/> (accessed 25 May 2020).

²⁵ India Child Protection Fund. April 2020. Report: Demand For Child Sexual Abuse Material In India. <https://www.icpf.org.in/reports> (accessed 25 May 2020).

²⁶ Child Exploitation Complaints Rise 106% To Hit 2 Million In Just One Month: Is COVID-19 To Blame? accessible <https://www.forbes.com/sites/thomasbrewster/2020/04/24/child-exploitation-complaints-rise-106-to-hit-2-million-in-just-one-month-is-covid-19-to-blame/#6837e89a4c9c> (accessed 15 May 2020).

²⁷ Note 23 at 3.

²⁸ Ibid. 3-5.

Isolation measures that have been put in place have also increased the difficulties in processing reports of online abuse and responding to them.²⁹ Many tech companies and law enforcement agencies are required to work remotely, which means they do not have the tools to take down abusive material quickly and effectively. In addition, helplines and hotlines have been reduced and law enforcement have been diverted from cyber crime offences to enforcing lockdown measures.

CONCLUSION

Identifying children who have been abused is challenging at best, but during the COVID-19 crisis identifying these children will be inherently more challenging since many adults who would normally be the ones to recognise abuse, are no longer in contact with the children, like teachers, childcare workers, social workers and extended family.³⁰

As the crisis abates and lockdown restrictions are lifted, it is the education systems that will serve as the first port of call for identification of post-COVID-19 trauma and abuse amongst children and they will, therefore, be forced into the implementation of a response.

²⁹ Ibid. 7.

³⁰ UNICEF. April 2020. **Child Protection and COVID-19**. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/covid-19/#status>.

The Washington Post With kids stuck at home, ER doctors see more severe cases of child abuse

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2020/04/30/child-abuse-reports-coronavirus/>

Lately, it's gone quiet. Since the [coronavirus](#) pandemic forced schools to close and families to stay home, the calls have slowed to two to five a week, with more of them involving children with injuries so visible — a broken arm, a beat-up face — an adult had to seek medical help.

Across the country, from [California](#) to [Iowa](#) to [Massachusetts](#), child abuse reports have plummeted since the virus arrived. In the nation's capital, hotline reports of abuse and neglect between mid-March and mid-April were 62 percent lower than in the same period last year, according to the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency. Reports to child protective services in Maryland have fallen just as far, and in Virginia, referrals from school staffers have dipped by 94 percent.

The cases surfacing often involve children so severely injured they end up in the emergency room and intensive care unit. In some hospitals, they are dying at an unusually high rate.

Pediatricians across the country are sounding the alarm: The stress of unemployment and financial insecurity has strained relationships between children and those who care for them. The closures of schools and day cares have forced children closer to adults who may not be safe.

The American system of catching child abuse relies on kids venturing outside their homes.

Year after year, most referrals to child protective services come from professionals — police officers, lawyers, doctors, anyone who comes into contact with a child as part of their job. But no group reports more than educators, who were responsible for 21 percent of the 4.3 million referrals made in 2018, [according to federal data](#).

That's because family are usually the abusers. In 2018, nearly 80 percent of perpetrators were parents of the victim. That year, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimated 1,770 children died of abuse and neglect.

With the country locked down, the only people seeing children are the very people most likely to abuse them, said Jeanine Harper, executive director of Greater Richmond SCAN (Stop Child Abuse Now)

At Children's National Hospital in the District, the overall number of children referred with child abuse concerns has dropped. But the cases coming in are more severe than usual: From March 15 through April 20 of last year, about 50 percent of the children had injuries serious enough to be hospitalized. This year, 86 percent did. During the same period last year, about 34 percent of children had head trauma, fractures, or injuries in multiple areas of the body. This year, that number jumped to 71 percent. Last year, 3 percent of the children referred for child abuse died. This year, 10 percent died.

"People are waiting until these children have stopped breathing or something extremely serious before they're coming into the emergency departments," Vinocur said. "When there's more reporting, we can pick up injuries that are more minor. Now we're relying on parents who have injured their child to bring them in."

Further resources on child protection and COVID-19

- [UNICEF COVID-19 page](#)
- [UNICEF Technical note on COVID-19 and harmful practices](#)
- [UNICEF Agenda for action: Protecting the most vulnerable children from the impact of coronavirus](#)
- [Technical Note: Protection of Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)
- [Technical Note: COVID-19 and Children Deprived of their Liberty](#)
- [Protection of Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Children and Alternative Care](#)