

The COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for policy in relation to children and young people

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Outline of the presentation

- Approach to the study
- The lives of children and young people before the pandemic
- Physical health
- Relationships, mental health and wellbeing
- Education and youth transitions
- The need for further research
- Conclusions



Approach to the study

Methodology

- Critical review of pre-COVID-19 research and emerging research in Ireland and internationally about the impact of the pandemic restrictions focusing on studies on children, young people and their families
- Key domains:
 1. Family and peer relationships
 2. Formal and informal learning
 3. Physical and mental health and wellbeing
 4. Transitions to further/higher education, training and the labour market

Methodology (2)

- Much of the research is based on online convenience samples – quick and cheap but selective response, not representative of broader population
- Also rapid reviews based on pre-COVID studies (e.g. on quarantine) and qualitative studies on specific groups
- Place greater weight on studies based on representative samples (such as CSO's Social Impact of COVID-19 Survey)

The lives of children and young people before the pandemic

- Positive parent-child relationships and high parental expectations for their children's future across all social groups
- But children from more socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds have:
 - lower levels of school engagement, academic performance and progression to higher education
 - poorer health, lower levels of physical activity and higher rates of overweight/obesity
 - more socio-emotional difficulties
 - less involvement in (largely paid-for) structured sports and cultural activities outside school
- Children and young people with special educational needs, Travellers, migrants and asylum-seekers, face additional challenges



Physical health

Physical health

- Disruption in access to medical and dental services (including school-based assessments) – very marked decline in ED attendance, especially for children (39% < 10s, 49% 10-19 years)
- Implications for continuity of care for chronic conditions and for waiting lists, especially in areas such as speech and language therapy where waiting lists were already long
- Will have affected disadvantaged groups more because of greater prevalence of long-standing conditions and lack of health insurance coverage
- The economic shock (job loss and income decrease) is likely to have a negative effect on children's health
- Further impetus for the roll-out of Sláintecare and the National Oral Health Policy

Diet and weight status

- No specific information on children's diet during the restrictions but insights from adult patterns
- Over 2/3 of those aged 18-34 and half of households with children increased their consumption of junk foods and sweets in April (CSO)
- Just under ½ of adults in households with children reported weight gain by May (CSO)
- Children's consumption is likely to mirror that of their parents

Physical activity

- School as an important arena for physical activity – PE and extracurricular sports – closure of schools and team-based activities
- Mixed results on PA during restrictions – over 1/3 adults increased their exercise, similar % decreased (CSO); increase in recreational walking (Sports Ireland)
- No systematic evidence for children but some suggestion of increased outdoor play (but also screen-time)
- More disadvantaged groups of children less likely to have a garden or a safe place to play locally
- Potential difficulty in re-engaging children in sports after restrictions; reduced income as a constraint for some families



Relationships, mental health and wellbeing

Family relationships

- Positive aspects to restrictions – more time with family (46% CSO)
- International research – significant double burden for parents, especially mothers (care/education – working from home)
- Significant decline in satisfaction with personal relationships in Ireland (during restrictions)
- Disruption to high levels of contact between children and their grandparents/extended family (especially among more disadvantaged groups)
- Increase in reports of domestic violence

Peer relationships

- Pre-COVID particularly strong reliance on peer networks among adolescents; friends as an important source of support
- Disruption to face-to-face contact during restrictions
- Very little evidence on virtual contact or on impact on friendships but online surveys of adolescents feature missing friends as a key aspect of the restrictions

Socio-emotional wellbeing and the pandemic

- Largest number of studies have focused on the effect of the pandemic restrictions on mental health and wellbeing
- International studies have shown very significant increases in depression and anxiety during the period of restrictions
- Greater increase among younger adults and women
- Evidence of a greater deterioration for those with previous mental health difficulties
- Job/income loss and overcrowded accommodation as particular stressors

Wellbeing among Irish adults

- Significant decline in life satisfaction (CSO) and marked increases in % feeling depressed, anxious and lonely
- Even in May a significant minority feel anxious or worried ‘a lot’ (Amárach tracker survey)
- Greatest decline in wellbeing among younger adults and women
- Pre-COVID research shows very strong links between parental wellbeing (especially maternal depression) and children’s socio-emotional outcomes
- Therefore expect adult patterns to be mirrored among children and young people
- Very significant impact of disruption in routine and lack of access to supports for those with SEN (Inclusion Ireland; Baron and Emmett)

Is this just short-term?

- Scale of the impact is unprecedented
- But evidence from previous natural disasters (e.g. Hurricane Katrina, 9-11) points to longer-term effects on children's anxiety levels
- Level of unmet demand for CAMHS pre-COVID
- Schools have an important role to play – wellbeing curriculum (incl. SPHE); potential for access to therapeutic supports via schools
- Duration of impact will depend on level of on-going financial strain, with parental stress affecting children's wellbeing



Education

COVID-19 Impact on formal learning

- 46% of parents in Ireland extremely/ very concerned about effect of educational disruption; 43% somewhat concerned (Doyle, 2020)
- School leaders: 76% student participation (much) worse; 70% student engagement (much) worse; group work and practicals most negatively affected (Mohan et al., 2020)
- UK: Estimates of formal learning time range from 11 hours per week (ONS) to 5 hours a day (IFS, convenience sample)
- IRL: average 1-2 hours per day. Fifth less than 30 minutes (Doyle, 2020). Substantial drop compared to school day.
- Lack of systematic information on experiences of students in further and higher education in Ireland

COVID-19 Impact II: Differences by social background

- DEIS schools report lower engagement in remote learning and more problems with broadband & devices (Mohan et al., 2020)
- Wide digital divide by level of disadvantage at the area level (including fewer on-line classes)
- UK substantial gap in formal learning time by highest v lowest income quintile: 1.3 hours per day, large cumulative effect with long closure (IFS)
- Previous research on summer learning loss and effects of school strike closures suggest impact greater for disadvantaged & lower-achieving students and in disadvantaged schools
- School provision plays a greater role in providing access to informal learning (cultural activities) for disadvantaged children; therefore school closures likely to widen the gap

Other disadvantaged groups

- Students with SEN:
 - Remote learning very challenging for those with behavioural, attention or intellectual difficulties
 - Lack of referrals; therapy appointments also cancelled
 - Parents lack suitable educational materials (Inclusion Ireland; Barron & Emmett)
- Migrant children:
 - Lack information on experience in lockdown.
 - Parents likely to face greater challenges in accessing information from school

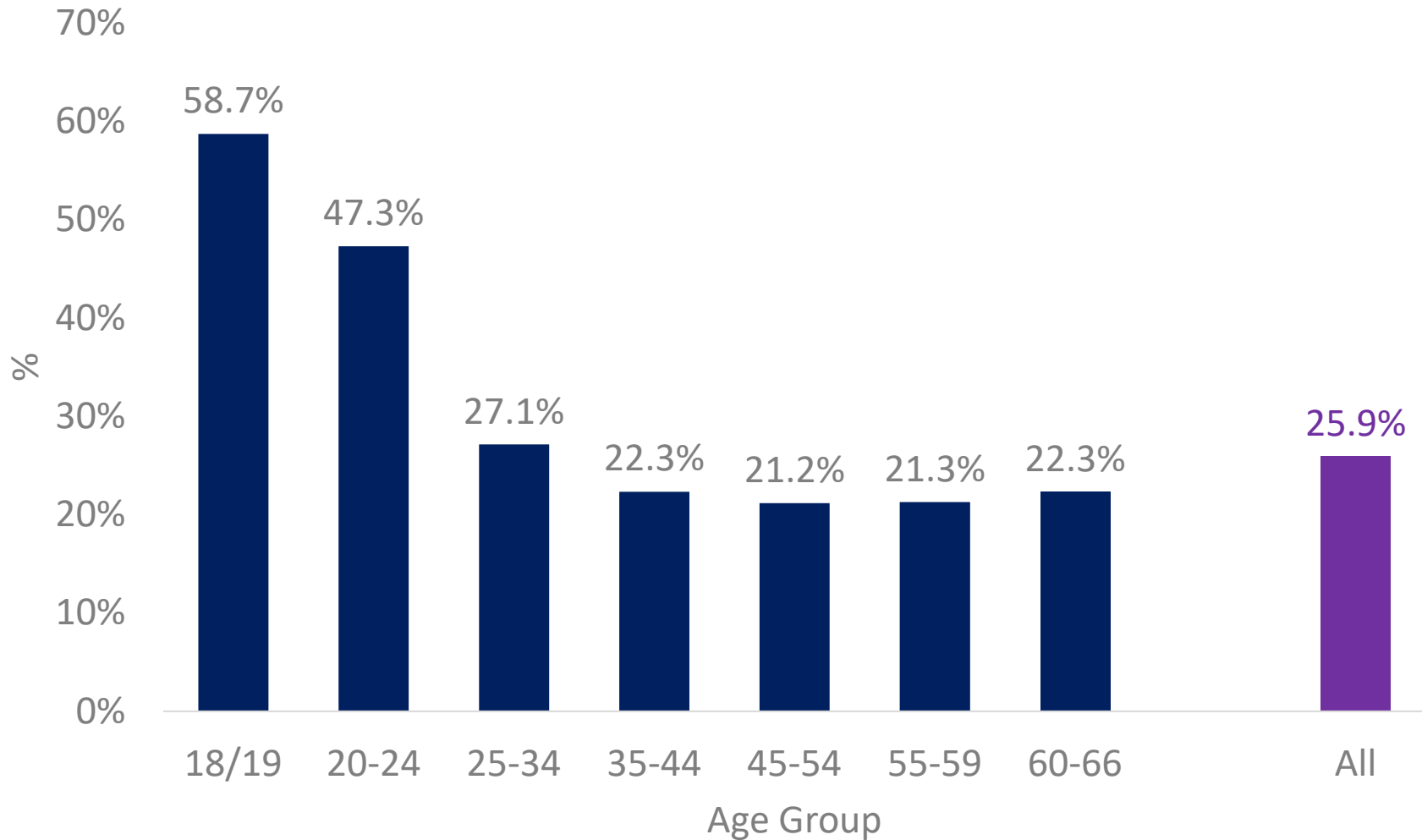


Transitions to further/higher education and the labour market

COVID-19 impact on youth employment

- Youth-friendly sectors, such as retail and hospitality sectors, were hardest hit
- Young people over-represented in job loss figures, emigration not an option
- Disruption to apprenticeships on-the-job training
 - CEDEFOP (2020) piecemeal approach across EU.
 - IRE: switch to distance learning in newer apprenticeships - ICT and finance
- Previous recessions:
 - Disadvantaged and early leavers hardest hit
 - Early unemployment and entering labour market in recession found to have long-term scarring effects on earnings, occupational mismatch and job satisfaction

Pandemic Unemployment Payment claims as % of employment level in 2019 Q4



COVID-19 Impact on FE/HE

- Education/training for most marginalised dependent on establishing trust (Youthreach study), likely to be more difficult without face-to-face contact.
- Financial impact: 44% of GUI 20-year-olds use part-time earnings to fund studies; adverse effect of job losses, lack of PUP/TWSS for seasonal workers, loss of parental income
- Applicants face uncertainty about new arrangements for teaching and learning at third level; and about likelihood of gaining entry



Further research

Further research

- Little systematic evidence on the impact on children and young people in Ireland
- Importance of capturing medium-term effects (after schools reopen) as an evidence base for policy development
- Potential for a special COVID survey of GUI Cohort '98 and Cohort '08 to capture the pandemic effects on two groups experiencing important life transitions
- Average pattern but also variation between groups in direct and indirect effects of the pandemic

Conclusions

- Evidence of a widening of pre-COVID patterns of inequality
- Very significant learning loss, especially among disadvantaged and those with SEN
- Risk of drop-out among those who disengaged during distance learning
- Children will be affected by increased parental stress; will likely persist in the face of sustained high unemployment (& phasing out of PUP/TWSS)
- Effect of previous recessions on children's socio-emotional and educational development

Conclusions (2)

- Much of the focus has been on the logistics of return to schools/early years provision
- But urgent need to address:
 - Learning loss: additional resources for one-to-one tuition/small group supports
 - Additional supports to assist readjustment for children/young people with SEN
 - Support for on-going viability of early years provision
 - Socio-emotional difficulties: within-school and therapeutic supports
 - Supports for youth transitions into the labour market: career guidance, investment in job-specific training, incentives to recruit apprentices, broader stimulus