

# THE EFFECT OF THE PANDEMIC ON ADOLESCENT WELLBEING IN IRELAND

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## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions brought significant disruption to the financial situation of families, largely in the form of job loss. This disruption might be expected to impact on adolescent wellbeing in two ways. First, reduced income might have a direct impact, making it more difficult for young people to access the resources (such as a computer or a quiet place to study) available to those in more advantaged families. School closures are likely to have made the absence of such resources more acute. Second, more indirectly, income loss can lead to stress among parents which, in turn, impacts on the wellbeing of young people. Our research looks at these two processes and at whether measures put in place to support families during the pandemic (principally, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment) helped reduce the negative consequences for adolescent wellbeing.

## DATA AND METHODS

The research draws on a special survey of Growing Up in Ireland Cohort '08 participants conducted in December 2020, a period when schools had reopened and restrictions were easing (before further restrictions in early 2021). The survey was completed online by 2,947 12-year-olds and their mothers. This group had previously been surveyed when the children were nine years of age. To assess wellbeing, we used the Mental Health Inventory (MHI-5) measure which includes items such as 'how much of the time in the past four weeks ... have you felt downhearted and blue?'. Higher scores indicate more positive wellbeing. This measure was used for the first time in the online survey so, to take account of potential differences in wellbeing before the pandemic, we control for the level of socio-emotional difficulties the child had at age nine. In addition, the survey asked about whether families had experienced job or income loss, experiences of

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learning while schools were closed, and the impact of the pandemic on social contact and day-to-day activities.

## **RESULTS**

COVID-19 restrictions resulted in a significant economic shock. Over one third of households reported that their incomes had fallen a lot or a little since the start of the pandemic. Young people had poorer wellbeing where one or both of their parents had lost their jobs. However, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment played a protective role, with better adolescent wellbeing in households receiving the payment.

Young people in families that experienced a fall in income were less likely to have the resources, such as a computer or a quiet place to study, to engage fully in home learning. Twelve-year-olds that had a computer suitable for remote learning and a quiet place to study had better wellbeing than their peers and having these resources accounted for some of the income gap in wellbeing observed. Income declines were also associated with a greater reduction in day-to-day activities that played a protective role in promoting wellbeing, including sports/physical exercise and seeing friends face-to-face.

We had expected that the economic shock would have an indirect effect on young people because of the stress experienced by their parents. We found much poorer wellbeing among adolescents who reported that they always or sometimes saw their parents as being 'worried at the moment' and among those who argued more with their parents than previously.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Our research yields useful insights into the way in which economic resources affect child outcomes. The findings show that income support provision protects child wellbeing, highlighting the importance of wider anti-poverty measures for child and adolescent development. The findings also suggest the need for ongoing support for more disadvantaged young people to overcome pandemic-related disruption to their learning and to counter potentially longer-reaching setbacks to their emotional wellbeing.

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