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Citation

Whittle, Antonia (2022). To what extent has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted on children and young people's mental health? Student dissertation for The Open University module YXM830 Advance your independent learning.

URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/90866/>

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Project question:

To what extent has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted on children and young people's mental health?

Output – Podcast

Transcript

(Sound Clip)

I would like to welcome you to this podcast, in which we are going to be exploring the topic children's mental health during the pandemic, this has been a unique couple of years - full of turbulence and upheaval for all of us, having to adapt to the fluctuating restrictions placed on our freedom but what impact did covid restrictions have on the mental wellbeing of our children.

Firstly, I would like to introduce myself, I am Antonia Whittle, a post graduate student with the open university who has been exploring how the covid pandemic has impacted on children and young people's mental health. In this podcast you will learn what some of the largest children charities are promoting, with one stating that our children's mental wellbeing is in a state of shocking decline and the pandemic hasn't helped.

We will then explore some of the research which has been conducted, I will demonstrate some which suggests pandemic experiences could be considered as toxic for children's mental health and also highlight some research which has an opposing view, that actually some children may have benefitted during lockdown.

Ultimately, this podcast will conclude with the view point that perhaps not all children suffered, that the inequalities we see in society, created unequal pandemic experiences.

(Sound Clip)

So what information is available in the public domain?

Most people will be familiar with the charity work of the children's society, they commissioned research working in partnership with the Department of Health and York University. Published in 2021 they stated that the nation's children's mental health was in a state of a shocking

decline. They applied a longitudinal research design and found that almost double the amount of children were struggling today with their mental health, than there were ten years ago. They also suggested that $\frac{1}{4}$ of a million children did not cope well with the pandemic.

I have worked in children's care and have close family members, who as young people, are struggling with their mental health and this combined with the Good Childhood report from the Children's society, lead me to consider, if it was the pandemic that has had this detrimental impact. So I needed to explore further academic research.

(Sound Clip)

What research is available through the Open University Data Bases?

On commencing my research I found a meta-analysis from Jones, et al. 2021. I considered this research to be reputable, as they were Open University researchers and faculty professors. Their research also employed a meta-analysis design, which is associated with less bias and more internal and external validity. Respected databases were also used in order to source their data. These researchers claimed that pandemic experience was linked to depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and even suicide.

This suggested to me that maybe our children in the UK were experiencing something similar to these experiences seen in previous pandemics.

Despite the strengths of this research however, the data gathered was from previous pandemics, these included the SARS outbreak and also the EBOLA epidemic. Therefore, it could be questioned as to how far we can make generalisations.

It could be argued that actually, children in the UK may have more support and opportunities to remain in contact with loved ones, even when isolated and adhering to social distancing, though the vast availability of social media and the internet, something which would not have been as readily an option for the children experiencing isolation through the SARs and Ebola outbreaks.

Furthermore, can the experiences of the ebola pandemic, where the impact was felt mostly in African countries truly relate to what would be the experiences of children in the UK.

Therefore, I needed to look for research closer to home.

(Sound Clip)

What research is available in the UK?

I found a piece of research from Scott et al 2021. Affectionately titled "I'm gonna tell you how Mrs Rona has affected me". In this study, children were encourage to write honestly and openly in electronic diaries about their thoughts and feelings during lockdown, with their anonymity protected. These young people expressed loneliness, worries for the future and anxiety around further restrictions and what this meant for their education.

Again, this research could be considered respectable as the researchers were from National Institute of Health Research and Newcastle University.

However, the draw back of this research was the small sample size and also the location in which the research was conducted. These children were located in the north east of the country, therefore I needed to find further studies from other geographical locations to see if similar results could be found across the country.

I came across research from Widnall et al., 2020 and to my surprise in this research Children reported a small increase in wellbeing during lockdown. Here in this research (which was also conducted in partnership with National Institute of Health Research). There was seen to be a decrease in the proportion of students at risk of anxiety and pupils also told of increased 'school connectedness', meaning they expressed more respect towards their school, learning and their teachers.

This surprised me, as my lines of enquiry so far had lead me to consider that on the whole, pandemic experience was detrimental to children's happiness. So I wanted to consider why these children may have benefitted, when others have not.

Sound Clip

Individual differences

If we consider the differences in location. The children in Scott et al's research were located in the north east of the country and the children in

Widnall's study, lived in the south east. Therefore did this geographical location, their environment offer protective factors to their wellbeing?

This was my next line of enquiry, that the geographical location had an impact.

Children in Scott's research who were from the North East, where unemployment and incomes are lower. This Office for National Statistics state that the North East has the least amount of disposable income than any other region in the UK, an average household income in Teesside is £15,000 to Bromley's £29,00. Almost double the household income from a north east town to a south east town.

So therefore, this could have impacted on their pandemic experience. Inequalities in income, poverty and household income struggles, may then have been the confounding variable to how children experienced the pandemic.

Children in the North East expressed their loneliness in lockdowns, worries for the future and stress over "not getting taught properly", according to a Female quoted in Scott's research. So, it could be suggested that if a child was experiencing poverty during the pandemic, then they may not have had an equal opportunity to access remote internet learning, therefore this impacting further on their stress.

The stance can be supported with ONS statistics where it was seen in 2018, 12.1% of the population of the North-East Region were non-internet users. The highest percentage of any region in the UK

Another protective factor for the wealthier children could be that they benefitted from their parents working from home. This could be supported with further data from Office for National Statistics. It was shown that parents working at home in the first lockdown were more likely to be middle and higher earners compared to lower income families. This ability to then remain more connected with their parents for children who come from a higher income family, may then have protected them from the negative effects of the pandemic, when children got to spend more time with their parents, would this have been the case for the children in North East?

It would have been interesting to make comparisons between parents occupations and see if this has impacted on the children's experience of

loneliness and worry in the pandemic. This could be an area of further and future research.

(Sound Clip)

Mental health and exercise

According to the American Psychological Association (2020), it is suggested that there is a growing body of research into physical fitness as one way to boost brain health and exercise is seen as a de-stressor. Therefore, it may be useful to have considered the amount of exercise that children were getting during the pandemic.

Considering this, I then explored differences in the abilities of some children to access outdoor space in the course of the pandemic. According to the ONS people in semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations, casual workers and those who are unemployed are almost three times as likely as those in managerial, administrative, professional occupations to be without a garden (ONS, 2020b).

Therefore, some children would have benefitted from access to outdoor space in which to exercise in, whilst others would have been at a disadvantage and this could be a variable in the pandemic experience on their mental wellbeing, a further consideration for future research.

When then considering these factors, that income and inequalities may be a factor in children's mental wellbeing during in the pandemic, I came across a research study that demonstrates supporting evidence for this stance.

Research co-produced by Ford, John and Gunnel (2021) and presented in the highly regarded British Medical Journal, found that some families coped well during the pandemic and others were facing financial adversity, struggling to home school, and risked experiencing vicious cycles of increasing distress.

I can consider this to be respectable research, as Ford is a researcher and professor from Cambridge University and the additional researchers were from as esteemed professions and universities.

There work is titled "Deterioration is clearest among families already struggling", I consider my personal views to be inline with this and this can be further evidenced with explorations of other children's charities.

(Sound Clip)

Childhood adversities and safeguarding

So maybe not all children were suffering through the pandemic, maybe some were suffering more than others. I found further support for children experiencing adversity through exploring data available from the NSPCC.

This large children's charity stated that they recorded a 53% increase from people with concerns about children experiencing physical abuse during the pandemic (NSPCC, 2020a). Counselling sessions for child sexual abuse, were also elevated from a pre-pandemic average of 8 sessions per week to an average of 23 per week since the first lockdown (NSPCC, 2020b).

These statistics are pretty shocking! If children have been seen to suffering from abuse throughout covid lockdowns then this is important to know and support - as according to Chandan et al, 2019 - children who have suffered from abuse are more likely to suffer from mental health issues (Chandan et al, 2019).

(Sound Clip)

So, to conclude, it's been an interesting journey exploring the research into the effects of the pandemic on children's mental health and I consider that there cannot be effective conclusions made to say one way or another if we can attribute poor mental health to pandemic experience, some appeared to cope well and others less so.

Perhaps we should not even try to claim the pandemic was to blame, it could be criticized for being reductionist in stance and then not viewing the child in a holistic fashion and promoting effective support for our children. So to go back to the Good Childhood Report, in their claim that the mental health of our children is in a shocking state of decline, this is hard to conclude with accuracy the causal reasons for this, with many confounding variables as noted, such as poverty and adversities. Some children may have shown more resilience throughout the pandemic with the support from their parents whilst they were working from home and some may have benefitted in access to outdoor space to promote exercise.

I hope you have found this podcast insightful, if not given us further ideas for future research into how the extent to which pandemic experience impacts on children's mental health, whilst considering inequalities as a confounding variable.

Thanks for listening to me, Antonia Whittle, I hope you have enjoyed this podcasts exploration of children's mental health during the pandemic.

(Long sound clip to finish)

Sound clip: Elin Sandberg / Stegosaurus / courtesy of www.epidemicsound.com

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