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How Covid lockdowns are wiping out the gains made by disadvantaged children

Gap between disadvantaged pupils and peers increases as children lost on average three months of learning by end of summer

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School closures have seen the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers grow Credit: Anthony Devlin/Getty Images Europe

Social mobility gains that have given a lift to disadvantaged children over the past decade could be wiped out by Covid lockdowns, one of Britain's leading education research bodies has said.

Carole Willis, the chief executive of the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), said its studies showed the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers had increased by almost half as children lost, on average, three months of learning by the end of this summer.

While ministers and scientists wring their hands over the Covid cost of keeping schools open, NFER data provides a warning of the scale of the current and potential future damage to a generation's education and job prospects caused by lockdowns.

The average disadvantaged children are 18 months behind, but that is now growing.

"It's taken 10 years to start to narrow the gap in terms of the attainment of disadvantaged children and their peers. That progress will be at least wiped and probably reversed," said Ms Willis.

Teachers from the most deprived schools surveyed by the NFER estimated that 57 per cent of their pupils would be in need of intensive catch-up this year, almost double the 32 per cent in the least deprived schools.

Boris Johnson has made keeping schools open a priority for this reason – that further time out of school will deny pupils critical catch-up classes and potentially leave them even further behind in their studies.

Boris Johnson talks to Year Seven pupils at a school in Coalville, Leicestershire, during a visit in August Credit: Jack Hill/AFP

At the heart of the issue, said Ms Willis, is a digital divide in which poorer families are almost twice as likely to have no computer access at home despite Government cash support for extra IT. "Added to that, children in lower income homes don't necessarily have a quiet place to study," she said.

It is why Robert Halfon, the chairman of the education select committee, is campaigning against any further closures. "They will hit all children but particularly the disadvantaged whose parents may be working and not be able to stay at home looking after them properly and helping them educate," he said.

The situation was starkly highlighted by Ofsted, which found that toddlers forgot how to eat with a knife and fork as they regressed at home during the first national lockdown. When children returned to nursery in September, some had become less independent, reverting to using dummies or wearing nappies again even though they had previously been toilet trained, its research showed.

Catching up on all lost education will be a major challenge and is likely to be unachievable. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development research has estimated that missing one third of a year of learning, across all children, could result in lost GDP of $2 trillion for the UK, based on a lower skilled labour force over an 80-year period.

For the Royal College of Psychiatrists, there has also been a mental health toll on the young that is not evenly distributed across the country, disproportionately affecting communities, often in the North, with high Covid rates.

In Oldham, where Dr Bernadka Dubicka, who chairs the college's child and adolescent faculty, holds clinics, some children have had to endure four two-week slots of self-isolation at home after being sent home following school outbreaks of the virus.

Socially-distanced children sit in class at a school in Oldham in June Credit: Oli Scarff/AFP

"It's worse than it was in lockdown. You are not even allowed to leave the house to exercise," said Dr Dubicka, who explained that children whose mental ill health could have been spotted by teachers are now turning up at clinics with far more serious problems.

The proportion of children aged five to 16 experiencing a mental disorder rose from one in nine in 2017 to one in six up to October this year including the spring lockdowns, according to the Cambridge University research published by NHS Digital.

"It's been a shocking increase in mental health problems. Children living in impoverished households were twice as likely to have mental health disorders," said Dr Dubicka. "If you have a supportive family, a good living situation and contacts online, you are going to be better off.

"School factors are invaluable. It's the structure and routine, the peer networks and friendships and safeguarding support. The absolute ideal situation is that schools are kept open for that."

Isolation has led more children to go online, with the consequent risks of being groomed by child abusers and criminal gangs. An increase in exploitation by county lines gangs during lockdown has seen the number of potential child victims of criminal exploitation overtake adults for the first time, according to Government figures.

Iryna Pona, the policy manager at The Children's Society, said: "We saw through our frontline services how criminals continued to cynically groom and exploit vulnerable children to traffic drugs during lockdown.

"They adapted their methods where necessary and took advantage of a situation in which many children were out of view of teachers, social workers and youth workers – meaning that even these shocking figures may be just the tip of the iceberg."

Emily Konstantis, the chief executive of the Safeguarding Alliance, said the gangs exploited families hit by debts caused by unemployment.

"The intent and scope and spread of county lines is far wider than it normally would be," she warned. "It has been really difficult to reintegrate children back into a physical society when they have been online for the best part of nine months. If we go back into lockdown, they won't be able to avoid being online. That is a dangerous situation."