

# POST-LOCKDOWN CHILDREN IN CRISIS

*Exploring the links between social distancing and the mental health of children in poverty*

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The  
**Childhood Trust**  
Alleviating the impact of child poverty

# INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the UK government implemented strict public health restrictions to reduce the spread of coronavirus. Fourteen months later, the UK has endured three national lockdowns and continues to practice social distancing measures to varying degrees.

While public health restrictions are still disrupting daily life for all UK residents, their effects are most acutely felt by vulnerable and marginalised groups. Children and young people, in particular, are suffering from restrictions on social contact, which compromise their education and opportunities for peer socialisation and play; all of which are key components of healthy childhood development.

Restrictions through 2020 and into 2021 resulted in school closures and a lack of access to traditional support services, which has disproportionately impacted low-income families who heavily rely on local charities, community organisations, personal networks, and schools to make ends meet.

Concerned about the effects of social distancing measures on the mental health and development of disadvantaged children, The Childhood Trust engaged 75 charities, children's programmes, and community organisations supporting approximately 85,890 children across London (approximately 10% of children in poverty) to identify the consequences associated with living under lockdown measures and the severity to which they're experienced by vulnerable children and young people in the capital.

The present report investigates the ways in which long-term social distancing measures have affected and may continue to affect children's mental health, wellbeing, and development. It ultimately finds that restrictions on social contact have significantly increased mental health issues among vulnerable children and young people in London over the past year and have contributed to clinically significant levels of heightened anxiety and depression amongst a random sample of 68 children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

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# KEY FINDINGS

- Incidence of mental health issues were two times higher in a sample of disadvantaged children in London (33%) compared to children across England (16%). This equates to 1 in 3 children living in poverty in London (approximately 266,700 children).
  - 82% of charity respondents reported that their beneficiaries were experiencing serious mental health issues as a direct result of lockdown measures.
  - Heightened anxiety (88%) and depression (79%) were the most common mental health symptoms experienced by disadvantaged children and young people according to the charities surveyed.
  - Incidence of clinical anxiety and depression were 23% higher in a random sample of disadvantaged girls in London aged 15-18 (50%) compared to teenage girls across England (27.2%).
  - The average total anxiety and depression score for boys aged 12-14 evaluated was approximately 30% higher than the mean score for unreferred boys in that age group.
  - Charities (41%) supporting approximately 35,215 disadvantaged children in London reported that their beneficiaries experienced greater abuse in home settings during lockdowns.
  - 77% of charity respondents indicated that a lack of social interaction and in-person play time are still compromising their beneficiaries' mental health post-lockdown.
  - 80% of charity respondents reported that social distancing and lockdown measures have made it challenging for children to exercise and maintain their physical health.
  - 75% of charity respondents reported that their beneficiaries are still experiencing food insecurity, even though children have returned to school and can access more substantial meals.
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Child poverty as imagined by a young boy supported by one of The Childhood Trust's funded projects

# BACKGROUND

## Vulnerable and Multiply Disadvantaged Children

In July 2020, England's Mental Health of Children and Young People (MHCYP) survey found that incidence of mental health conditions among children in England aged 5-16 increased to 16%, compared to 10.8% in 2017. [1] Similar results were found by the CO-SPACE study, which reported that children from low-income households and children with special educational needs, in particular, showed elevated mental health symptoms throughout the pandemic. [2] Over the past year, specific groups of children have experienced lower personal wellbeing than others. [3] A recent report published by the Department of Education stated that in 2020, levels of anxiety have been higher in children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with additional needs. [4] School closures resulting from public health restrictions have been exceptionally challenging for multiply disadvantaged children and children with complex needs. Children of frontline workers, children with disabilities, and children living in food poverty are three groups whose levels of wellbeing have worsened under restrictions on social contact.

### i. Children of frontline workers

Children of frontline workers are particularly vulnerable to anxiety during health emergencies. In June 2020, a UK-wide study found that young people whose parents are key workers exhibit significantly greater levels of COVID-19 anxiety and trauma and report more somatic symptoms. [5] One key reason for this is that children of frontline workers worry about their parents' safety and well-being at work because of the risk of exposure to the virus.

Several key work sectors are low paid, which means that disadvantaged children are more likely to have a parent or carer employed in key work. The food and social care sectors are particularly low paid; Over half of all employees in both sectors earn £10 or less per hour, which is below the long-term target for the National Living Wage. [6] Children living in low-income households are at a higher risk of COVID-19 related anxiety due to their parents' occupations.

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[1][https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(20\)30570-8/fulltext#back-bib1](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(20)30570-8/fulltext#back-bib1)

[2][https://cospaceoxford.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Report\\_08\\_17.02.21\\_updated.pdf](https://cospaceoxford.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Report_08_17.02.21_updated.pdf)

[3][https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/925329/State\\_of\\_the\\_nation\\_2020\\_children\\_and\\_young\\_people\\_s\\_wellbeing.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/925329/State_of_the_nation_2020_children_and_young_people_s_wellbeing.pdf)

[4]Ibid.

[5]<https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-08/Impact%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20the%20well-being%20of%20young%20people%20aged%2013%20to%2024%20-%20University%20of%20Sheffield.pdf>

[6]<https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/BN285-Differences-between-key-workers.pdf>

### ii. Children with disabilities

Schools play an important role in maintaining the physical and mental health of children with disabilities. SEN schools function as providers of special needs identification and offer specialised tools and resources to families that have children with additional needs. These tools and resources are particularly vital for the 40% of disabled children and young people that live in poverty in the UK. [7]

Families with disabled children are more likely to experience poverty and face barriers in accessing reliable childcare and mental health support. During the first lockdown in spring 2020, anxiousness among disabled young people was slightly higher than non-disabled young people. [8] However, anxiety levels among disabled young people in the UK incrementally increased through the summer months while schools were closed, culminating in a sizeable difference in anxiety levels between disabled and non-disabled young people in September 2020. [9]

### iii. Children in food poverty

1.3 million children in the UK were reported to be eligible for free school meals in 2019. [10] Many of these children were reliant on school meals to sustain their nutrition at the beginning of the pandemic. [11] It has been estimated that approximately half of eligible children did not receive meal provision during lockdowns and school closures. [12]

Adequate nutrition is an essential part of a child's development. People who experience food insecurity in their childhood are at a higher risk of suffering from diseases like diabetes, obesity, and cancer in their adulthood. [13] Not only do nutritional deficiencies negatively impact children's physical health, but they also impact educational performance and mental health. Hunger affects children's ability to concentrate and can trigger aggressive behaviour. [14] It can also cause parental stress, which further compounds poor health.

In a three-year project exploring food bank use in the UK, the Trussell Trust found that poor health was a common experience among families referred to food banks. [15] Almost 75% of people referred to food banks reported that a member of their household was in poor physical health, while 50% reported that their family members were affected by poor mental health, specifically anxiety and depression. [16]

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[7]<https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/news/2020/february/nearly-half-everyone-poverty-either-disabled-person-or-lives-disabled-person>

[8][https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/925329/State\\_of\\_the\\_nation\\_2020\\_children\\_and\\_young\\_people\\_s\\_wellbeing.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/925329/State_of_the_nation_2020_children_and_young_people_s_wellbeing.pdf)

[9]Ibid.

[10]<https://adc.bmj.com/content/archdischild/early/2020/12/09/archdischild-2020-320214.full.pdf>

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid.

[13]<https://adc.bmj.com/content/archdischild/101/8/759.full.pdf>

[14][https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/London-Children%E2%80%99s-Food-Insecurity\\_A4\\_DIGITAL-spreads.pdf](https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/London-Children%E2%80%99s-Food-Insecurity_A4_DIGITAL-spreads.pdf)

[15]<http://bath.foodbank.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/108/2020/02/State-of-Hunger-Report-November2019-Digital-min.pdf>

[16]Ibid.

## Early Years and Development

Nurseries play an important role in promoting healthy childhood development. Through the pandemic, early years providers in the UK have experienced lower numbers of attendance and overall income due to lockdowns. Many have had to close entirely. [17] During the first national lockdown in spring 2020, only 5% of places at early years settings in England were attended. [18]

Children that miss out on crucial opportunities to experience independence and interaction with other students may be unprepared for primary school. Before the pandemic, children from the poorest fifth of earners in the UK fell nearly a year behind their expected stage of development by age five. [19] This disparity continues well into primary and secondary school. At the level of GCSEs, the gap becomes even more pronounced. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation finds that only 21% of the poorest fifth of students are able to achieve five marks ranging from grades A-C, compared to 75% of the top fifth. [20]

A report from the Department of Education shows that divides between privileged and underprivileged youth has grown significantly during the pandemic. [21] Students in secondary schools with high rates of free meal eligibility have experienced 2.2 months of learning loss, whereas students in schools with low rates of free meal eligibility have lost approximately 1.5 months. [22] Young students eligible for free school meals are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity during the pandemic, which not only affects their educational attainment, but also their physical health.

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[17]<https://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/press-release/04-february-2021/londons-under-fives-risk-falling-behind-due-pandemic>

[18]<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>

[19]<https://adc.bmj.com/content/archdischild/101/8/759.full.pdf>

[20]<https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/poorer-children-education-full.pdf>

[21][https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/962330/Learning\\_Loss\\_Report\\_1A\\_-\\_FINAL.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/962330/Learning_Loss_Report_1A_-_FINAL.pdf)

[22]Ibid.



## Socialisation and Play

In addition to educating and empowering students, schools respond to children's immediate, practical needs by offering substantive meals and safe spaces to play, exercise, and socialise. Without reliable access to these outlets, disadvantaged children are more likely to become stressed and develop long-term physical and mental health issues. A study conducted by Youth Sport Trust found that 59% of girls aged 4-10 surveyed reported missing play time at school through the pandemic. [23] 33% said they felt sad most of the time during lockdown. [24]

One reason for this could be a reduction in opportunities to exercise. According to Sport England, 47% of children and young people aged 5-16 in England took part in 60 minutes of physical activity per day before the pandemic. [25] As of July 2020, only 19% of the same age group were getting 60 minutes of physical activity every day. [26] According to their parents/carers, 13% of children from low-income families were more likely to have done no physical activity during lockdown, compared to 6% of those from more affluent backgrounds. [27]



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[23]<https://www.youthsporttrust.org/evidence-paper-impact-covid-19-restrictions-children-and-young-people>

[24]Ibid.

[25]<https://www.thinkactive.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Sport-England-Childrens-experience-of-physical-activity.pdf>

[26]Ibid.

[27]Ibid.



## Home Learning and Attainment Gap

Learning outcomes in the pandemic have been greatly strained by school closures, which have worsened the attainment gap, further dividing youth along class lines. The OECD reports that in countries across Europe and North America, many children are not receiving adequate educational instruction at home, and as a result, are dedicating their attention to passive activities like TV and computer games. [28] Children in poverty are more likely to be distanced from opportunities to learn and engage effectively in their classes, whether individually or in group settings. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that, on average, primary and secondary school children spent four and a half hours per day on home learning, a loss of 25% and 30% in pre-pandemic learning time, respectively. [29]

The impacts of school closures are felt to different extents by different groups of students. Although the level of academic progress has fallen across the board among primary school students, the drop in the number of disadvantaged children working to the expected levels for their age group has been more pronounced. Juniper Education found that across all primary year groups, only 43% of disadvantaged students reached age-related expectations for reading in 2020, compared to 63% of non-disadvantaged students. [30] Similar patterns exist in subjects such as writing and mathematics.

One key driver of the worsening attainment gap between UK students is a lack of access to technological resources and additional academic support. In the most deprived state schools, 15% of teachers reported that over a third of their students do not have the electronic devices necessary for learning, compared to 2% of teachers in the most well-off schools. [31] Additionally, platforms for online classing and chats were more likely to be offered to the richest third of students than to the poorest third. 60% of private schools and 37% of schools in affluent areas had a digital platform, compared to 23% of the most deprived schools. The Sutton Trust reports that 2/3 of children in the UK have not taken part in online lessons since schools have closed. A key reason for this is the absence of proper equipment. [32]

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[28]<https://www.oecd.org/education/The-economic-impacts-of-coronavirus-covid-19-learning-losses.pdf>

[29]<https://ifs.org.uk/uploads/R178-Family-time-use-and-home-learning-during-the-COVID-19-lockdown-1.pdf>

[30]<https://junipereducation.org/youngest-pupils-learning-worst-affected-by-covid-19-pandemic-new-report-reveals>

[31]<https://www.oecd.org/education/The-economic-impacts-of-coronavirus-covid-19-learning-losses.pdf>

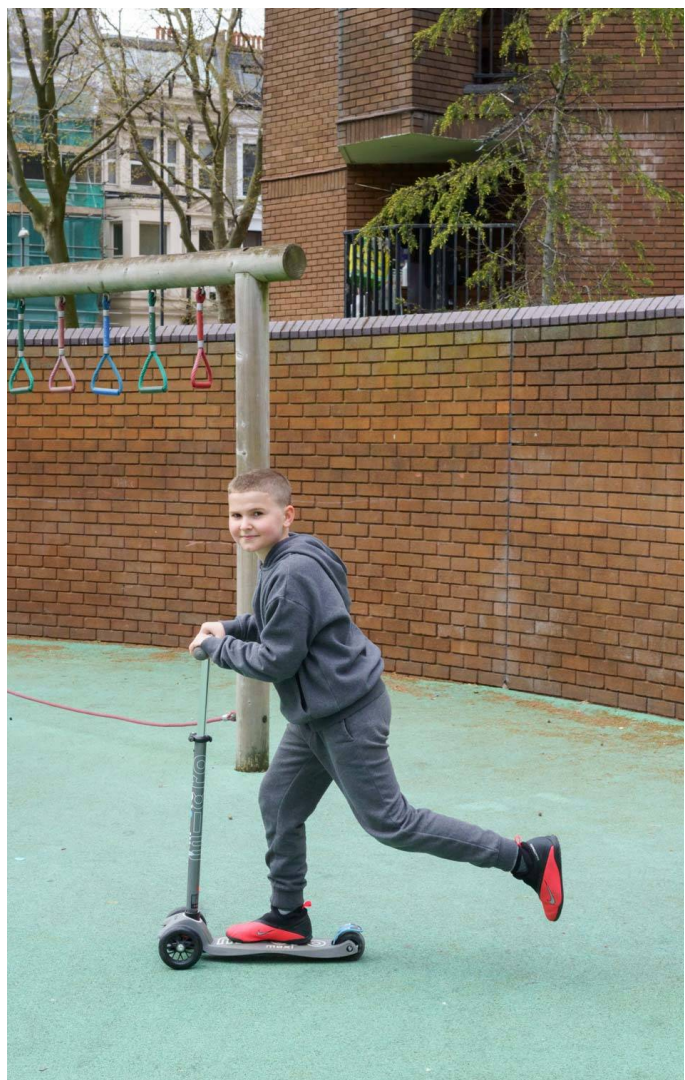
[32]<https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/covid-19-and-social-mobility-impact-brief>

# METHODOLOGY

The Childhood Trust administered a survey across 75 charities, children's programmes, and community organisations collectively supporting approximately 85,890 disadvantaged children and young people in all 32 London boroughs. The object of the research was to better understand the links between social distancing measures, lockdown, and the health and wellbeing of children in poverty.

In tandem with this, The Childhood Trust used the Revised Children's Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS-P), an anxiety and depression assessment tool used by healthcare providers globally, to evaluate the current mental health (on an individual level) of a sample of 68 disadvantaged children and young people supported by these organisations. The sample was selected randomly; parents and carers of children supported by the surveyed organisations were asked to complete the survey. All complete survey submissions were evaluated.

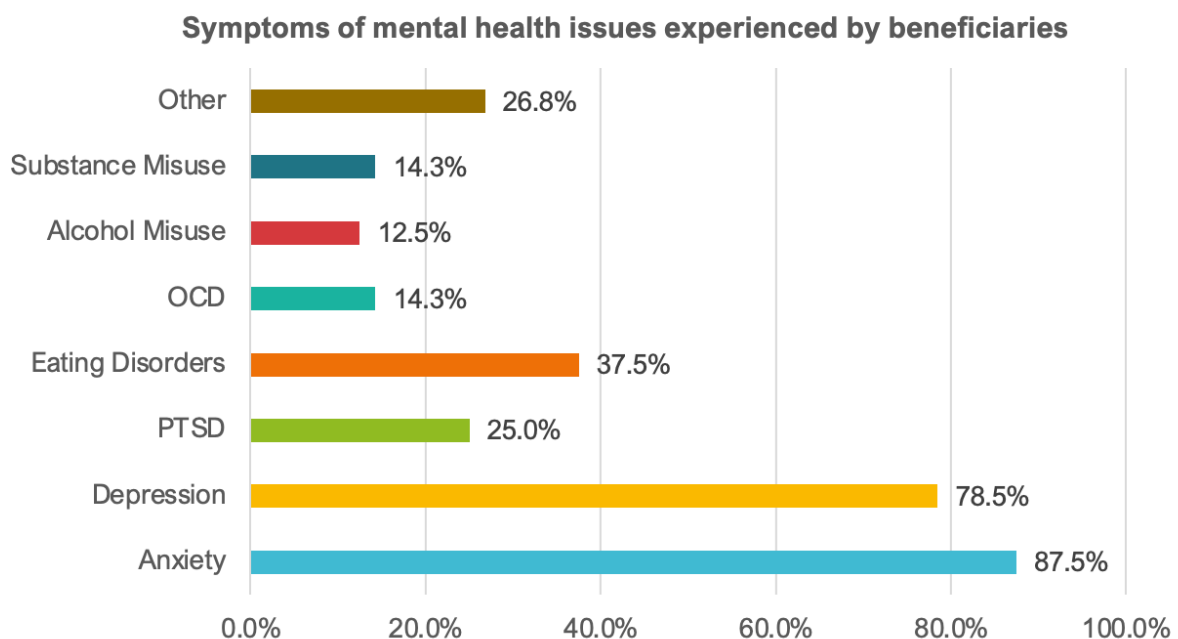
While the data collected from the charities more widely represents the experiences of disadvantaged children and young people living in London, the RCADS-P offers a localised snapshot of the mental health of a group of children from exceptionally deprived backgrounds.



# FINDINGS

## Mental Health and Wellbeing

800,000 children in London are living in poverty. 75 survey responses from charities and community organisations supporting children in London shows a widespread consensus on the impacts of social distancing measures on children's mental health and wellbeing. 92% of the respondents, which collectively support approximately 10% of children in poverty in the capital, reported that social distancing measures have severely degraded their beneficiaries' mental health. A further 82% of respondents supporting approximately 70,430 children stated that their beneficiaries are experiencing serious mental health issues as a direct result of lockdown measures. Heightened anxiety (88%) and depression (79%) were the most common mental health disorders recorded. Additionally, experiences of eating disorders (38%) and PTSD (25%) were also noted by the organisations surveyed.





In addition, several charities raised concerns about suicidal ideation amongst their beneficiaries. One respondent wrote, *"in secondary school we have had reports of suicidal ideation and self-harm."* Another wrote, *"we are aware of children who have been suicidal due to the impact of poverty."* 27% of the respondents noted that their beneficiaries were expressing suicidal ideations. This was also echoed by Sonya, a mum of two supported by The Childhood Trust's Decorate A Child's Life programme.

Lockdown measures intensified the physical and emotional abuse that Sonya and her two daughters were experiencing. Sonya told us that living in an abusive home setting at the start of the pandemic initiated her 8-year-old's suicidal ideations. The girl would repeatedly tell her mum that she hated life and wanted to end it.

Data collected through the Revised Children's Anxiety and Depression Scale (RCADS-P) verified charities' reports of their beneficiaries' mental health issues. The scores from the RCADS-P administered to parents/carers of 68 beneficiaries of local charities indicated that disadvantaged children are disproportionately experiencing anxiety and depression.

The overall findings from the RCADS-P reveal that experiences of anxiety and depression are statistically high amongst a random sample of disadvantaged children and young people in London aged 8-18, despite lockdown measures having ended.

From the data collected, boys aged 12-14 and girls aged 15-18 had the highest total scores for anxiety and depression. The average score for all boys in the age group was 65, which is roughly 30% higher than the average score for unreferred children of the same age group. The average score for girls aged 15-18 was 64; however, 50% of the girls evaluated scored over 73, which is above the threshold for clinical significance and represents the top 2% of scores for unreferred girls the same age.

The children aged 8-11 evaluated also displayed high scores for anxiety and depression. One third of the scores for girls aged 8-11 were statistically very high (score >70) and met the threshold for clinical significance. One quarter of the boys evaluated met the clinical threshold (score >70) for symptoms of anxiety and depression.

*"I didn't really do much. I just slept all day honestly. There wasn't anything to do. I wasn't really eating either. During lockdown, I had problems with eating... since I've been back at school it hasn't really gotten better either. It's kind of gotten worse." - Ava, 11*

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## Socialisation and Development

A beneficiary of the Decorate a Child's Life programme explained how social distancing measures isolated her and her children from their support networks. She said, *"because of the pandemic we were more isolated than ever before. I think that had a massive impact on us and was a detriment to us because we couldn't get any help... and I couldn't form a bubble with my parents because they're elderly."*

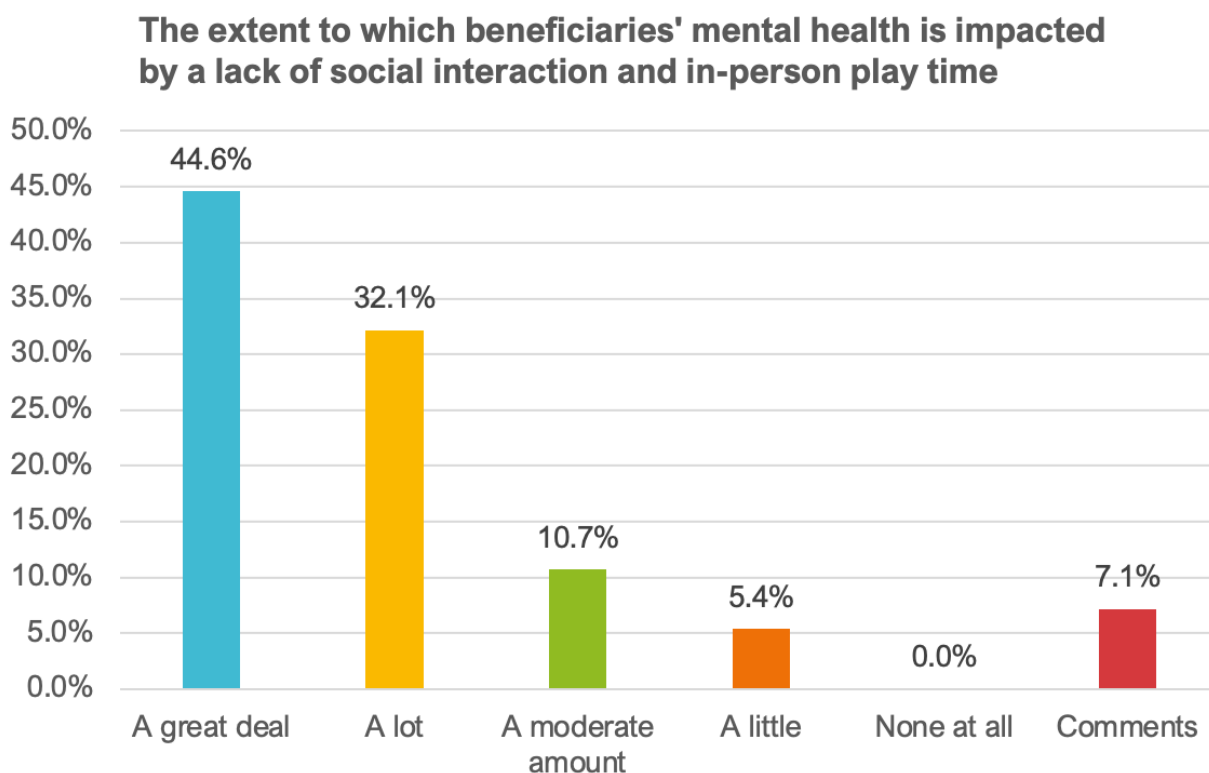
Not only have social distancing measures affected beneficiaries' mental health, but they have also contributed to the destabilisation of social networks, which play a vital role in the socialisation and development of children and young people. Prohibitively expensive early years providers force many low-income families to rely on their personal networks for free childcare. Consequently, social distancing measures leave many low-income families, especially those in in-work poverty, without access to suitable or reliable childcare solutions. According to one charity, this has been particularly detrimental to BAME communities *"who habitually visit their relatives and siblings to support each other both financially and physically."*



77% of the respondents indicated that a lack of social interaction, including loss of extended family interactions and in-person play time, are compromising their beneficiaries' mental health. Furthermore, the majority of respondents (52%) noted an accelerated rate of mental health issues amongst children living under lockdown measures. Others said that their beneficiaries are now maladjusted to social distancing measures, which is equally concerning. Anxious-avoidant behaviors have been observed in such children with a reluctance or even fear to meet and play with other children.

*"I was looking forward to going back to school but when I got there I wanted to come home again because the teacher didn't make any sense. I just couldn't understand what he was saying. I'd forgotten everything. Now I don't want to go to school anymore. I feel really anxious." - Sammy, 9*

One respondent commented that their beneficiaries have now *"grown used to prolonged isolation but this not a good thing."* Another said, *"some of our beneficiaries have adapted to the measures, but most of the young people we support have already experienced adverse childhood experiences and/or suffer from mental health issues, which have been exacerbated by the current situation."*





## Physical Health and Home Life

The charities surveyed identified a number of negative consequences of social distancing on children's physical health and home life, in addition to their mental health.

*"I remember when I went to school - that was my escape from my home life," said the mum of two beneficiaries of The Childhood Trust's Decorate A Child's Life programme. She grew up in an abusive home and is greatly concerned that her children haven't had respite from their difficult home life.*

41% of respondents noted that their beneficiaries were experiencing greater abuse in home settings as a result of lockdown measures. One respondent said that they know their beneficiaries are experiencing abuse from *"qualitative feedback"* they receive, but another explained that it's been difficult to track their beneficiaries' experiences of abuse because many *"have not been able to maintain contact with us over this period"*, due to a lack of technology and face-to-face interaction. Social distancing measures have fully blocked channels of support for children living in dysfunctional, unstable, or abusive homes. This issue is fortified by a lack of digital access in low-income families, which several charities identified as a pressing issue.

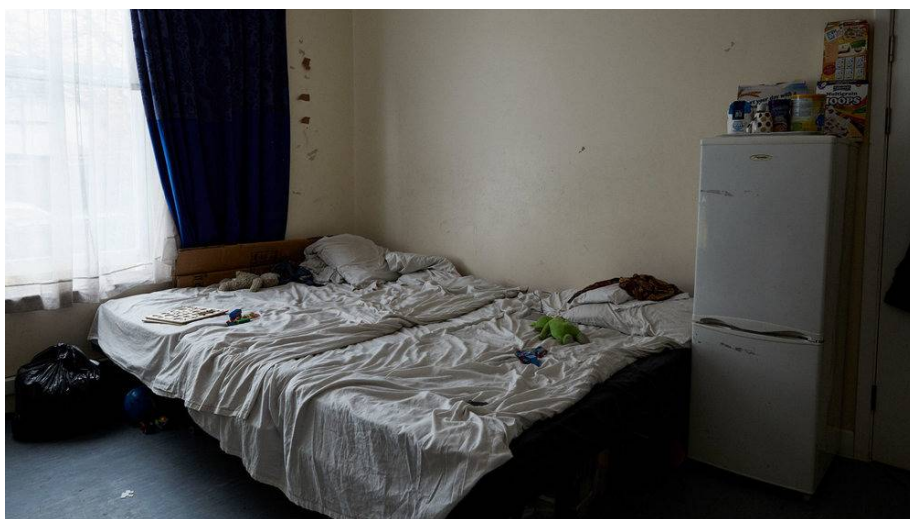
75% of respondents indicated that their beneficiaries are still experiencing food insecurity, even though children have returned to school and can access more substantial meals. One charity reported that they've *"seen a massive increase in referrals to the food bank. About one third of all beneficiaries are children under 16."*

In addition to experiencing food insecurity, beneficiaries of children's charities in London are struggling to exercise and maintain their physical health. 80% of respondents reported that social distancing and lockdown measures have made it challenging for children to exercise and get much-needed outdoor play time.

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Dream bedroom as imagined by a young girl supported by one of The Childhood Trust's funded projects



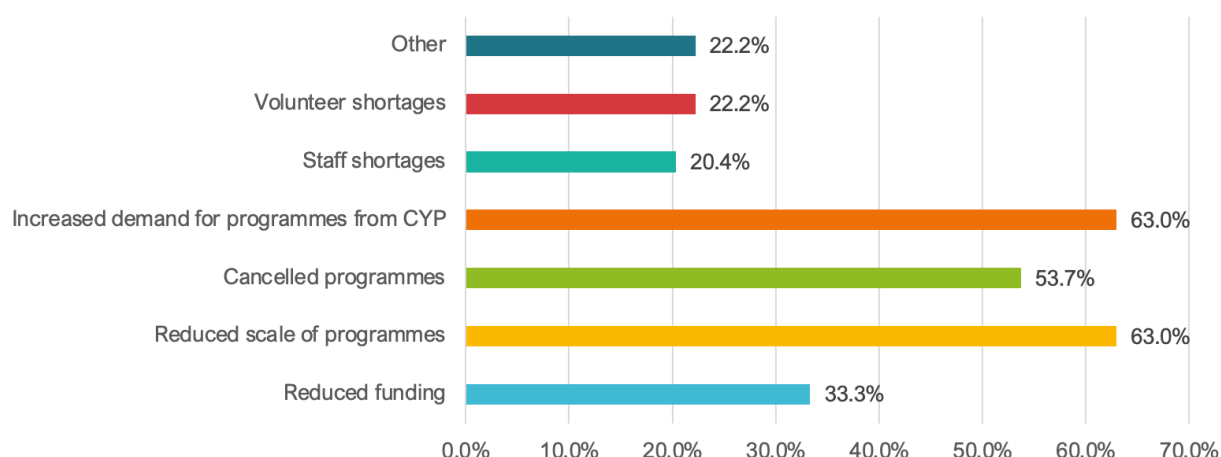
The bedroom of two young boys living in poverty in London as shown in The Childhood Trust's Bedrooms of London exhibition

## Access to Support

Social distancing measures have also significantly impacted the operations of the children's charities and youth centres that fill gaps in support for disadvantaged children in London. 63% of the respondents noted that reduced scale was the pandemic's biggest impact on their services. 63% of the respondents also reported that they've seen an increase in demand for their services.

Some charities reported that while they may not be overwhelmed by an influx of new beneficiaries now, they expect to be impacted later this year. One respondent said, *"we have huge demand 'waiting' (as evidenced by contact from our referral partners desperate for us to reopen), but because we can't run the majority of our projects until April due to covid restrictions, we're not currently overwhelmed. (But give us a couple of months....)."*

**Main impacts of COVID-19 on charities' programmes and services**



While charities are trying to address the increasing need for their services, they're facing notable shortages in funding (33%) and resource (42%). 53% of respondents stated that their organisations had to cancel programmes altogether due to social distancing and lockdowns. As lockdown measures lift, charities expect to be flooded with referrals and requests for support, which will be difficult to address after operating on reduced programmes and with staff shortages for over a year.



# CONCLUSION

75 survey respondents from charities and community organisations supporting disadvantaged children in London indicate that lockdown measures and subsequent school closures are disproportionately impacting children and young people from low-income families. According to the organisations surveyed, the mental health of the children and young people they support is degrading at a rapid rate, as symptoms of depression and anxiety are increasingly prevalent.

Scores from the RCADS-P evaluating a random sample of 68 disadvantaged children and young people in London align with these findings. Severe anxiety and depression scores that meet the threshold for clinical significance were more common among the evaluated sample, especially in girls aged 15-18, who have been highlighted as a group of concern in other recent studies investigating children's mental health during the pandemic.

Overall, findings from the charity survey and RCADS-P show that disadvantaged children are particularly vulnerable to poor physical health, mental health, and abuse during the pandemic and will be in desperate need of safe spaces to play, socialise, learn, and grow as lockdown measures continue to lift.

These findings provide a stark context to The Childhood Trust's £4m Champion's for Children campaign, which launches on June 7th 2021 and will fund 114 children's charities across London to engage over 150,000 children. This programme will provide opportunities for children to receive intensive support over the long summer holiday and beyond, helping to restore well-being through play and supervised activities. This will ultimately help to ensure that thousands of children can return to school free from the burden of anxiety and depression and have the best chance of successfully resuming their education.



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