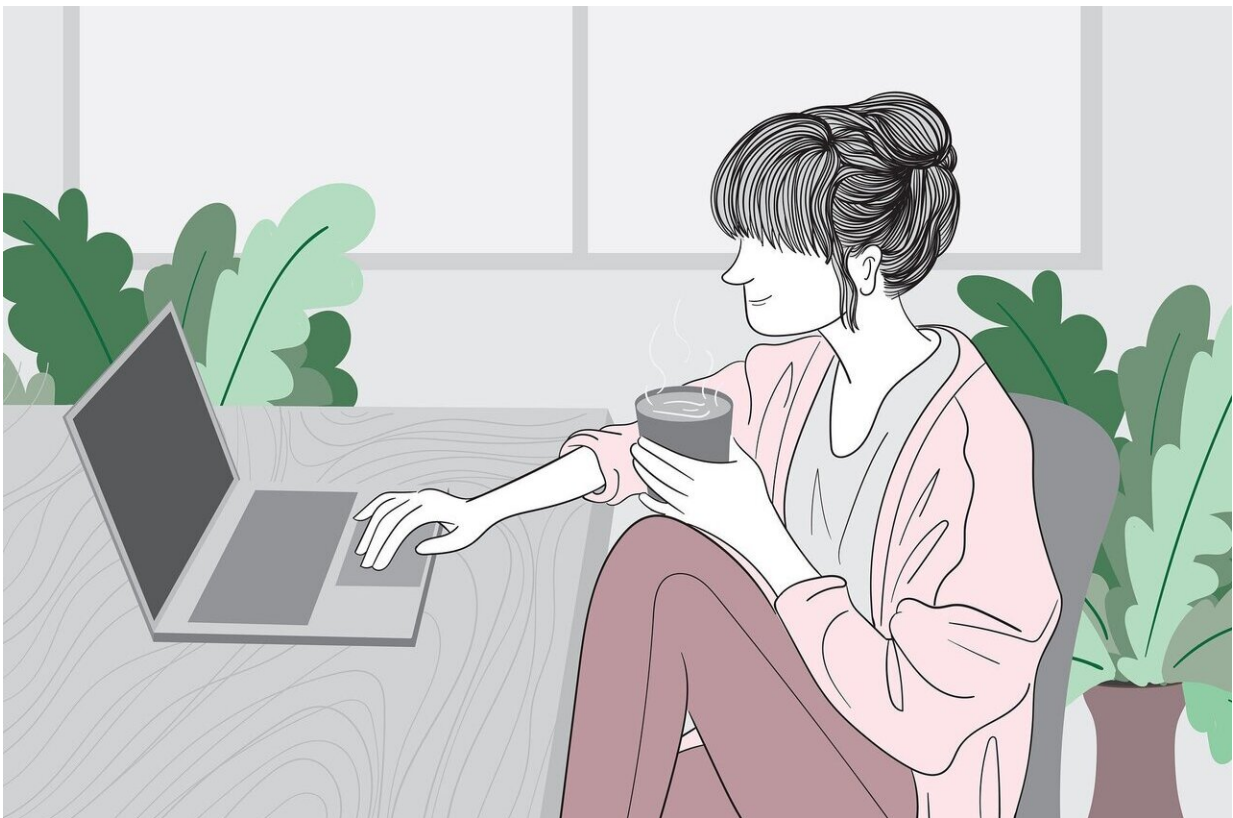


# Study shows how lockdown has increased mental health difficulties for vulnerable children

April 28 2021

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The pandemic increased mental health problems among vulnerable children, with financial strain on parents a major factor, a study by

Cardiff University has found.

During the pandemic, researchers interviewed 142 five to 10-year-olds who had been identified by schools as "at risk" for mental [health](#) problems, and they then compared this to pre-pandemic data.

Mental health problems, particularly anxiety, increased "significantly," the study found.

There was a strong link between financial stress and mental health problems in parents, which was in turn associated with worsening [mental health issues](#) among children, the researchers discovered.

Families whose financial circumstances have been seriously impacted by lockdown need monetary support and extra mental health support, they concluded.

The findings are published in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry Advances*.

Lead author Professor Stephanie Van Goozen, from Cardiff University's School of Psychology, said: "To our knowledge this is the first study to highlight the severe impact of COVID-19 on already vulnerable children and families.

"Our analysis shows how the financial stress caused by the pandemic is associated with—and possibly responsible for—increased mental health problems in children through its impact on parental mental health.

"The findings make for distressing reading, especially when seen in the context of continuing economic uncertainty. It is vital that these families get the extra support they need—both financially and emotionally."

The children, along with one parent, were interviewed via videocall between July and September 2020. The researchers compared this to data collected prior to the pandemic as part an ongoing study.

The parents and children took part in validated interviews and questionnaires to assess various aspects of child and parent mental health and to understand financial strain and their living circumstances.

Of the families who took part, 57% were living in poverty or reported to have experienced loss of employment, loss of income, struggled to pay bills, were at risk of eviction or loss of accommodation, unable to afford sufficient food, or had to use emergency loans or foodbanks during lockdown.

The key findings were:

- Increasing levels of mental health problems in already [vulnerable children](#) during lockdown (69% compared to pre-pandemic 61%);
- 57% of parents reported high levels of anxiety and 44% reported high levels of depression during lockdown;
- There was an increase in anxiety and panic symptoms in children, as well as school anxiety, but no changes in problematic behavior.

Professor van Goozen said: "Many children and families have seen a huge change in their lives, in education, employment, physical activity and social contact. Parents have had to balance work commitments—or losing their work—with managing their children at home and this has no doubt caused significant stress.

"Plans that are currently being developed to support children in general will not be sufficient for those who are more vulnerable, who live in

poverty and who have [parents](#) with [mental health problems](#). Vulnerable children will need a sustained and multi-faceted approach to support their recovery."

Professor Stephan Collishaw, co-director of Cardiff University's Wolfson Centre for Young People's Mental Health, which focuses on research to help reduce anxiety and depression in young people, said: "The study shows the disproportionate effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on already vulnerable families.

"There is an urgent need to provide support to families most impacted by COVID-19, and as we move out of the [pandemic](#) to focus on [children's](#) longer-term educational and mental health outcomes."

**More information:** Dolapo Adegboye et al. Understanding why the COVID-19 pandemic-related lockdown increases mental health difficulties in vulnerable young children, *JCPP Advances* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/jcv2.12005](#)

Provided by Cardiff University

Citation: Study shows how lockdown has increased mental health difficulties for vulnerable children (2021, April 28) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-04-lockdown-mental-health-difficulties-vulnerable.html>

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