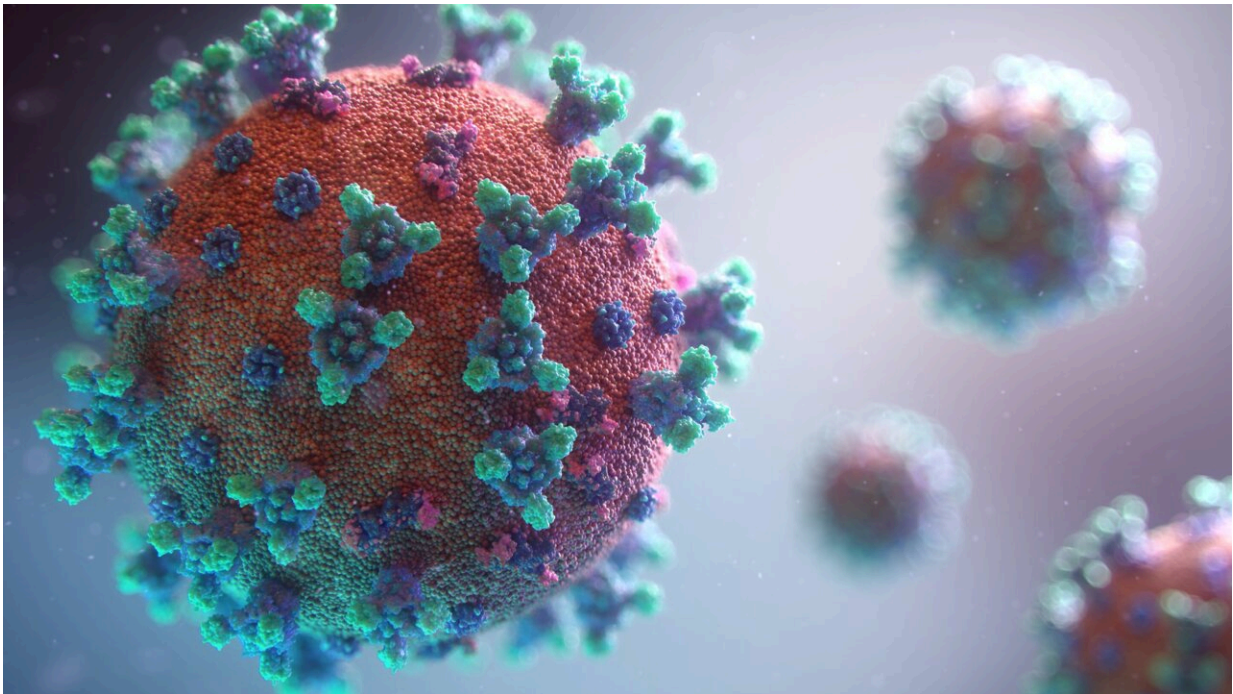


Forgotten orphans left behind in COVID-19 pandemic, study reveals

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A visualization of the COVID-19 virus. Credit: Fusion Medical Animation, Unsplash, CC0 (creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/)

A global study of pandemic deaths led by researchers at The Australian National University (ANU) has revealed why some countries have seen a greater number of children who have lost one or both parents due to COVID-19.

The analysis—[based on data released in 2021](#)—found fertility rates, poverty, vaccine coverage and the concentration of diseases such as diabetes and heart disease in certain age groups all contribute to a larger risk of children becoming orphaned during the pandemic.

ANU researcher Callum Lowe said while there are countries where the orphan rate is much higher than Australia, the data shows that an estimated 1,800 to 1,900 young Australians lost at least one parent during the pandemic.

"We think of COVID-19 as a disease that largely affects older people, but we have forgotten about the young people and children that are left behind," Mr Lowe said.

"These are children that may have lost one or, sometimes tragically, both parents. They were grieving in lockdowns, away from other family and friends and without the routine of normal school life.

"That has an impact on their mental health, their education and their well-being over the long term.

"It highlights that COVID-19 isn't just having an impact now but is having a huge effect on the next generation."

Australia's COVID-19 orphan rate is estimated at 0.13—that means for every 100 deaths caused by COVID-19 about 13 young people have lost one or both their parents. In some countries such as Angola, the orphan rate is more than two, meaning the number of children orphaned is at least double the number of people who have died from COVID-19.

Rates of fertility, poverty and non-communicative disease among people of reproductive age are strong predictors of which countries will experience a high number of COVID-19 deaths and a relatively low

number of orphaned children.

Some of the countries most affected by the risk of orphaned children were in Africa, particularly countries that were below median GDP per capita and that had a higher proportion of people with non-communicative diseases between the ages of 15 and 49.

In almost all global regions, a higher risk was also associated with lower vaccination coverage. This means countries that are already suffering an elevated risk of children being orphaned will continue to suffer into the future.

"The research highlights the need for government resources and policy settings that ensure children affected by the death of one or both parents are properly supported, particularly in vulnerable populations like First Nations and rural communities," Mr Lowe said.

"COVID-19 has spread to almost every country on the globe but there continues to be huge disparities about the effect on different countries."

Mr Lowe is a Research Officer and Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Global Health at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at ANU.

More information: COVID-19 orphans—Global patterns associated with the hidden pandemic, *PLOS Global Public Health* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pgph.0000317](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0000317)

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