

Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Ymchwiliad i effaith argyfwng Covid-19 ar blant
a phobl ifanc yng Nghymru

COV 133
Ymateb gan: Darlithydd Troseddeg ym
Mhrifysgol Aberystwyth

Welsh Parliament
Children, Young People and Education Committee

Inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on
children and young people in Wales

COV 133
Response from: Criminology lecturer at
Aberystwyth University

I am a Criminology lecturer at Aberystwyth University with a particular interest in youth justice.

I have been looking at how the Covid-19 crisis (and ensuing policies/issues etc) have affected children in the youth justice system, and I have identified a number of specific difficulties for them which are somewhat different than for the general population of children and young people leading me to believe that they have been abnormally affected by the situation. I have summarised the main points below, separated into the different issues for children in custody and children involved with youth justice in the community:

For children in custody:

- All visits have been cancelled – although information encourages staying in contact, no physical visits can take place; isolation from family; lack of legal support potentially for children on remand.
- Fear – lack of ‘normal’ support from family/friends
- No generalised access to the internet, despite ‘connect, connect, connect’ policy of the Youth Custody Service (and despite in the community, use of the internet has been hailed as a life-saver for human contact!)
- No guaranteed access to the outside – dependent on staffing, etc, potentially leaving children vitamin D deficient, and spending far too much time locked up in individual cells (exacerbated by an ‘in-room’ policy for educational activities as much as possible – this is effectively putting them in extended solitary confinement)
- No contact with family members – if Covid-19 is in evidence, may lose family members to it and have no way of ever seeing them again, attending funerals, grieving with other family members
- The early release scheme does not appear to have resulted in many children being released (but figures for this do not seem to be available); part of the problem may well be the stipulation that they

must have accommodation arranged before this can be considered, which has been a sticking point for good resettlement for years, and does not appear to be getting better; so children might not be viewed as eligible simply because they have no where to live, which cannot surely be fair.

For children in the community:

- Youth Offending Teams are often an important point of abuse identification (whether through observation or disclosure) which, as lost face-to-face meeting between YOT workers and children have not been happening (they have often been through phone apps like What's App, but this might well be through the abuser's phone).
- Risk of abuse/neglect at home with no safety valve - Increased tension at home due to lockdown - increased risk of criminalisation
- Reduced contact with a wide range of external services, including child and adolescent mental health services, who have also been conducting their appointments by phone (mental health issues might well be rising because of the crisis, so it is difficult to see how this can be addressed through phone-only contact)
- No meaningful education (if not 'identified' as vulnerable or a key worker's child) - these children have an over-representation of learning difficulties, delays and disabilities, and are less likely to have parents who are willing/able to teach them at home
- Risk of fines/prosecution for breaking lockdown (increased criminalisation)
- Possible problematic access to the internet (vital for access to education), as other sources of internet (libraries etc) are closed; these families are less likely to have internet at home and/or computers on which to effectively access education (they may well have phones with mobile access to the internet, but it is difficult to see how much education could take place here)
- Operational difficulties have meant that YOTs have largely stopped the voluntary work with children on prevention programmes, so they will miss out on this well-evidenced work to keep them out of the youth justice system.
- Loss of free school meals meaning that poverty issues are exacerbated
- The lack of court action has mean no early revocation of cases, which would largely be done routinely for children doing well on court orders, so they will stay YOT-involved for longer.