



## Lockdowns Killed Hundreds of Thousands of Children, Says the UN – Was it Really Worth It?

### Description

**UK: The reports by [Ofsted](#), [NFER](#) and by the head of the Speech and Language Unit in Northern Ireland highlighted the devastating impact of Covid policy on the education and development of children in the U.K.**

This article addresses the damage to children beyond education and the impact on children across the world and poses the question, “Was it worth it?”

As I address [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#), school closures and mask wearing are responsible for the appalling damage to children’s education and development, but the damage goes beyond this.

There is a huge amount of evidence about the damage caused by COVID-19 restrictions to children’s mental health. The impact has been alarming.

In a [report by Collateral Global](#), eight out of ten children and adolescents report an increase in negative feelings due to the COVID-19 pandemic. School closures contributed to increased anxiety, loneliness and stress; negative feelings due to COVID-19 increased with the duration of school closures.

The Hart Group’s detailed research reported:

One in six children were [reporting significant mental health problems](#) and, by winter, one in four young people felt ‘[unable to cope](#)’. In autumn 2020, Ofsted (the schools inspectorate in England) identified a [worrying increase in self-harm and eating disorders](#), while lockdowns evoked an ‘explosion’ of children with [disabling tic disorders](#). This surge in mental health problems led to record numbers of children being [prescribed antidepressants](#). The cumulative mental health consequences of 18 months of pandemic restrictions was summarised in a recent comprehensive [review of the research evidence](#), carried out by Collateral Global, which concluded that the impact on children and adolescents was ‘severe’, with 80% of young people reporting a deterioration in their emotional wellbeing.

In a [letter](#) during the second lockdown in January 2021, ten of the U.K.'s top experts in child health said anxiety, depression, self harm and suicidal thoughts reached frightening levels among children as they struggled to cope with school closures.

The letter, signed Professor Claire Hogg, Dr. Ian Balfour Lynn and Professor Sejal Saglani and others, added: "As in the first lockdown, we are witnessing an acute and rapid increase in mental health and safeguarding cases affecting children and parents alike."

It was [reported](#) that five times more children and young people committed suicide than died of COVID-19 during the first year of the pandemic in the U.K. Lockdowns are more detrimental to children's health than the virus itself.

What about children in the rest of the world?

A [report](#) issued by UNESCO and then jointly reissued with UNICEF and the World Bank is damning.

School closures carry high social and economic costs for people across communities. The impact however is particularly severe for the most vulnerable and marginalised boys and girls and their families... Schooling provides essential learning and when schools close, children and youth are deprived opportunities for growth and development. Schools are hubs of social activity and human interaction. When schools close, many children and youth miss out of on social contact that is essential to learning and development.

As Professor Russell Viner, President of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, told the U.K. House of Commons Education Committee: "When we close schools we close their lives."

The report continues:

The quantity of education lost is momentous. At its peak school closures affected 1.6 billion children in 188 countries. Education systems were on average fully closed for 121 instructional days and partially closed for 103 days... Classroom closures continue to affect more than 635 million children globally, with younger and more marginalised children facing the greatest loss in learning after almost two years of Covid.

The world's poor were disproportionately affected.

The percentage of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries cannot read or understand a simple text will rise to 70%.

In Brazil, students in São Paulo learned only 28% of what they would have in face-to-face classes and the risk of dropout increased more than threefold.

In South Africa schoolchildren are between 75% and a whole school year behind where they should be, with up to 500,000 having dropped out of school altogether between March 2020 and October 2021.

In Ethiopia, primary age children are estimated to have learned between 30-40% of the maths they would have in a normal school year.

In Mexico the number of 10-15 year olds not able to read has risen by 25%

The *Guardian* reports that a quarter of the world's school systems are on the verge of collapse.

As much of the developing world faces a combination of interrelated crises including extreme poverty... there are growing fears for a "lost generation of learners".

In an analysis ranking countries according to their vulnerability, Save the Children found eight countries to have school systems at "extreme risk", with the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria and Somalia deemed most vulnerable, with Afghanistan following closely behind.

It found that a further 40 countries, including Yemen, Burkino Faso, India, the Philippines and Bangladesh, were all at "high risk".

The story is the same in developed countries.

In the U.S., [according to NWEA](#) in 2020:

Preliminary Covid slide estimates suggest students will return in fall 2020 with roughly 70% of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year. However, in mathematics, students are likely to show much smaller learning gains, returning with less than 50% of the learning gains and in some grades, nearly a full year behind what we would observe in normal.

A study from the Netherlands [reported](#) a learning loss equivalent to 20% of a school year, adding: "Among less-educated households, the size of the learning slide is up to 60% larger than in the general population."

The European Commission [report](#) entitled "The likely impact of COVID-19 on education" using information from international datasets found:

'Conservative' estimates for France, Italy and Germany suggest that students will suffer a weekly learning loss. of between 0.82% and 2.3% of a standard deviation, lockdown would mean a reduction in scores of between 6.5 and 14 points. The switch from offline to online learning caused by COVID-19 is expected to exacerbate existing educational inequalities. More vulnerable students, such as for instance those from less advantaged backgrounds, are especially likely to fall behind during this emergency period. These students are less

likely to have access to relevant learning digital resources (e.g. laptop/computer, broadband internet connection) and less likely to have a suitable home learning environment (e.g. a quiet place to study or their own desk). Additionally, they may not receive as much (direct or indirect) support from their parents as their more advantaged counterparts do. In more affluent families, parents are more likely to be able to work from home and are also more likely to afford private online tuition.

Additionally such loss will translate into a reduction of available human capital, including future lower earnings for the student cohorts directly affected by the lockdown. For example, rough estimates indicate that the aggregate annual earnings loss that French primary school students will experience because of the COVID-19 confinement period amounts to between 700 and 800 million euro.”

Robert Jenkins, UNICEF’s Head of Education, said:

In March, we will mark two years of Covid-related disruptions to global education. Quite simply, we are looking at a nearly insurmountable scale of loss to children’s schooling. While the disruptions to learning must end, just reopening schools is not enough. Students need intensive support to recover lost education.

And experience has shown that learning losses continue even after schools reopen.

Drops in development reported by Ofsted in the U.K. are mirrored elsewhere in the developed world. The evidence from the U.S. is [particularly clear](#):

A consistent trend of measures from 2011 to 2019 [was noted] and then a significant decline in 2020 and 2021, corresponding to the COVID-19 pandemic. Mean ELC dropped by 20 points in children three months to three years of age.

Maternal stress, anxiety, and depression in pregnancy can impact the developing foetal and infant brain structure and connectivity, leading to potential delays in motor, cognitive, and behavioural development. Past analysis has revealed strong associations between maternal prenatal stress and anxiety and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, increases in maternal and paternal stress due to job-loss, employment furloughs, or increased food/housing insecurity have been experienced by many families...

We find that children born during the pandemic have significantly reduced verbal, motor, and overall cognitive performance compared to children born pre-pandemic. Moreover, we find that males and children in lower socioeconomic families have been most affected.

A study in *JAMA* found that “compared with the historical cohort, infants born during the pandemic had significantly lower scores on gross motor, fine motor, and personal-social skills”.

In France, a [study](#) entitled “Adverse Collateral Effects of COVID-19 Public Health Restrictions on Physical Fitness and Cognitive Ability” found:

Physical fitness, particularly cardiorespiratory fitness, is strongly associated with academic achievement in children and adolescents... The present work highlights an alarming decline in both overall physical fitness and cognitive performance among primary school French children due to the public health restrictions imposed in order to slow down the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

This link between physical activity and development is supported by an Early Years Foundation Stage [report](#) carried out by the University of Exeter which examined the link between child's play and mental health under the title of "How the lack of physical activity in Covid has hit learning".

The study found that the proportion of children achieving at least expected levels in physical development at the end of Reception year was five percentage points lower than pre-pandemic cohorts.

The findings suggest that the pandemic had a negative impact on the physical development of young children, and this impact can be seen in all aspects of a child's development.

As a practitioner in Northern Ireland, a teacher of some 20 years' experience of primary and nursery children noted when comparing her current cohort with previous cohorts: "They are all so behind in their reading, writing and number work and lacking in emotional maturity, self-regulation of emotions, concentration span and listening skills."

But again, the impacts went well beyond education and development loss, critical as those are.

UNESCO reports that child and youth mental health has become a crisis within a crisis. Around the world, children experienced social isolation, disruption to daily routines, stress associated with parental employment, and feelings of uncertainty about their future.

In the U.S., the CDC [reported](#): "During February 21st-March 20th 2021, due to suspected suicide attempts Emergency Department visits were 50.6% higher among girls aged 12–17 years than during the same period in 2019."

Fair Health reported: "In March and April 2020, mental health claim lines for individuals aged 13-18, as a percentage of all medical claim lines, approximately doubled over the same months in the previous year.

In India, according to Bibin V. Philip in the *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*:

Globally, suicide among children is a significant preventable public health problem, and it is the second leading cause of death among younger people aged 10-24 years. During this COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, the suicidal tendency among school children is significantly rising.

Similar reports from other parts of the world have also shown a significant increase in the deaths of children due to suicide during the lockdown period than the prelockdown period.

In the U.K., the mental health charity Young Minds reported in February 2021 that:

67% believed that the pandemic will have a long-term negative effect on their mental health. This includes young people who had been bereaved or undergone traumatic experiences during the pandemic, who were concerned about whether friendships would recover, or who were worried about the loss of education or their prospects of finding work.

79% of respondents agreed that their mental health would start to improve when most restrictions were lifted, but some expressed concern at the prospect of future lockdowns.

A UNICEF [report](#) found that 150 million additional children will grow up in poverty. Millions of girls are being driven into child marriage and over 80 million children are missing routine childhood vaccination for diseases that kill them. Lockdowns are estimated to be responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands of children – 228,000 in South Asia alone, according to another UNICEF [report](#).

The World Health Organisation [reports](#) that over 60,000 additional children died from malaria in 2020 alone.

Africa [suffered](#) its first wide recession in decades. In poorer countries, recessions raise mortality, particularly among children and well into the future.

As early as March 2021, the Children's Commissioner for England and Wales Anne Longfield reported that the class of 2021 lost the equivalent of 840 million school days.

Since lost education affects life expectancy, the school closures for 24.2 million U.S. schoolchildren were estimated to have resulted in the loss of 13.8 million years of life.

Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states:

In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

Is this what we have done?

Was it worth it?

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