

**Evidence to the Office of the
United Nations High
Commissioner for Human Rights
on Child Rights and SDGs:
“Sustainable and resilient
recovery from the COVID-19
pandemic”**

November 2020

Introduction

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) is Great Britain's national equality body and has been awarded an 'A' status as a National Human Rights Institution (NHRI) by the United Nations. In our capacity as Great Britain's NHRI we have a key role in supporting and scrutinising the UK and devolved Governments' compliance with international human rights law, including through its response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The pandemic is having, and will continue to have, an unprecedented and profoundly negative impact on children. This is already evident across many different aspects of children's lives. In this submission we have identified, using the evidence that is available, some of the ways in which the pandemic has exacerbated existing issues and where it has led to new problems. The significance of the pandemic for children's rights is, however, continuing to evolve and is therefore not yet fully known.

As part of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's (UN CRC) examination of the UK, we submitted an alternative report in October 2020.¹ The report highlights many of our key concerns with regards to children's rights and the pandemic, and recommends that the UK and Welsh governments urgently conduct critical analyses of the short- and long-term impact of the pandemic on children, giving consideration to the compounding negative effects and the disproportionate impact on certain groups.

In addition, we have published a separate research report examining the equality and human rights implications of the pandemic, in which we warned that it risked creating a "lost 'COVID generation' as young people miss out on education and are likely to be hardest hit by job losses".² We urge governments and policy-makers to ensure that the pandemic recovery is used as an opportunity to "tackle long-standing concerns and deep-rooted inequalities"³, and that equality and human rights are put at the heart of recovery strategies.

In this submission we intend to contribute to the OHCHR's highlighting of 'red flag' risks by making reference to our concerns in relation to some of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) under consideration. The submission is not an exhaustive illustration of our concerns, but represents a selection of the urgent challenges in Britain in implementing the SDGs.

¹ Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) (2020), [Children's rights in Great Britain](#).

² EHRC (2020), [How coronavirus has affected equality and human rights](#), p.4.

³ Ibid.

Goal 1: No poverty

Before the pandemic we had significant concerns about the increasing number of children living in poverty in Britain. In 2018/9, there were 4.2 million children in the UK living in relative poverty, with 3.7 million children living in absolute poverty.⁴ Children living in families where someone is disabled, children living in lone-parent households, and children from certain ethnic minorities are disproportionately likely to be living in poverty.⁵

The UK Government's changes to the welfare system, taxes and public spending in recent years continue to have a significant negative impact on the living standards and rights of millions of children. Analysis that we conducted before the pandemic on these changes found that an extra 1.5 million children are projected to live in poverty by 2021/2, with the biggest impact felt by those from the lowest income households.⁶

These concerns have been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, during which people living in areas of deprivation have been disproportionately affected⁷ and the UK Government has rejected calls to uplift out of work benefits at the same rate as other benefits.⁸ Even with this uplift, a survey found that seven in 10 families with children claiming certain benefits have had to cut back on essentials, with half of families behind on rent or other essential bills.⁹ Groups who already faced poverty are more likely to have seen their income reduced during the pandemic,¹⁰ with families with children among those that have lost out the most.¹¹ With these figures only reflecting the early months of the pandemic, we are concerned about the potential long-term impact on families with children.

It is however estimated that an additional 200,000 children will live in relative poverty by the end of 2020.¹² Not only are the direct effects of poverty devastating, but we believe

⁴ Department for Work and Pensions (2020), [Households Below Average Income, Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2018/19](#), Table 4b.

⁵ Ibid., Tables 4_3db and 4_5db.

⁶ EHRC (2018), [The cumulative impact of tax and welfare reforms](#), pp. 23-24

⁷ Office for National Statistics (2020), [Deaths involving COVID-19 by local area and socioeconomic deprivation: deaths occurring between 1 March and 31 May 2020](#), fig. 8

⁸ MS Society (2020), ['UK Government says it's "too complicated" to give disabled people extra COVID-19 support'](#), 3 June

⁹ Maddison, F. (2020), ['Call for a stronger social security lifeline for children'](#), Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 17 June.

¹⁰ Joyce, R. and Xu, X. (2020), [Sector shutdowns during the coronavirus crisis: which workers are most exposed?](#) Institute for Fiscal Studies Briefing Note BN278

¹¹ Lee, T.(2020), ['Families hit harder because nothing for children in COVID-19 response'](#), Child Poverty Action Group, 12 May

¹² Institute for Public Policy Research (2020), [1.1 million more people face poverty at end of 2020 as a result of coronavirus pandemic, finds IPPR](#), 4 June 2020.

cumulative impacts should be of concern too, given the links between poverty and other outcomes, such as educational attainment and health inequalities.¹³

Poverty is one of the main barriers to the full enjoyment of children's rights. In order for any recovery to be sustainable and resilient governments must put equality and human rights, and the best interests of the child, at the heart of its strategy. We have, for example, called on the UK and Welsh Governments to reintroduce income poverty-related targets to eradicate child poverty, with clear accountability mechanisms and measurable indicators for meeting these targets.

Goal 2: No hunger

An estimated 2.5 million British children are living in food insecure households,¹⁴ and there has been a worrying increase in the number of emergency food parcels provided to households with children over the past five years.¹⁵

Though some children receive free school meals (FSM), we are concerned that the eligibility criteria do not extend to all those who need them. A recent inquiry found that fewer than half of all secondary school-age children living in poverty in England, and only 57% in Wales, are eligible for FSM.¹⁶ Children from families with no recourse to public funds are not eligible for FSM. School holidays can also create additional challenges for families who rely on FSM, with some children forced to go hungry or having to rely on charities to provide meals.

The pandemic risks pushing more families into poverty. Food insecurity has increased dramatically, with over 1.5 million people in households with children unable to access food for economic reasons¹⁷ and food banks seeing demand for food parcels among families with children almost double.¹⁸ In the face of such devastating impact for children we have urged the UK and Welsh Governments to consider providing universal free school meals or, at a minimum, extending eligibility to all children living in poverty.

Goal 3: Good health and wellbeing

Good health in children is essential to the enjoyment of other rights. However we are concerned about persistent inequalities in access to healthcare and in outcomes.

The pandemic has had, and will continue to have, a profound impact on the mental health of children. This comes at a time when the mental health of children is already deteriorating. Between 2017 and 2020 the number of children in England with a

¹³ EHRC (2020), [How coronavirus has affected equality and human rights](#), p.20.

¹⁴ The Food Foundation (2019), [The children's future food inquiry final report is here!](#)

¹⁵ The Trussell Trust (2020), [End of year stats](#)

¹⁶ The Food Foundation (2019), [Children's Future Food Inquiry](#), pp. 46-47.

¹⁷ The Food Foundation (2020), [Food Foundation Polling: third survey – five weeks into lockdown](#)

¹⁸ The Trussell Trust (2020), [UK food banks report busiest month ever](#), 3 June 2020

probable mental disorder increased dramatically from one in nine to one in six.¹⁹ Hospital admissions due to self-harm increased by at least 21% between 2011/2 and 2017/8,²⁰ and suicide rates have increased substantially, almost doubling in Wales between 2014 and 2020.²¹ Despite this, there are significant gaps between need and the availability of services.²²

Early indications show that the impact of the pandemic is likely to be severe and long-lasting. By July 2020, 81% of children with previous mental health issues reported that their mental health had deteriorated.²³ With children cut off from support at school and the reduced capacity of the health service,²⁴ the short and long-term impacts of the pandemic require the urgent attention of the UK and Welsh governments. We have recommended that these governments commit to increased, ring-fenced and long-term funding for a range of children's mental health support services and interventions both during and after the pandemic.²⁵

Goal 13: Climate action

Undoubtedly one of the most significant threats to the physical well-being, and indeed the right to life, of children is the climate crisis and the effects of pollution.²⁶ Children are suffering the ill effects now – at least 4.5 million children in the UK are currently growing up in areas with unsafe levels of air pollution,²⁷ and the UK has the highest rate in Europe of childhood asthma caused by air pollution.²⁸ The response from the UK Government, however, has lacked action with the UK on track to miss several environmental targets.²⁹ Without immediate and bold action by the UK and Welsh governments to reduce emissions and pollution levels, the health, well-being and lives of children will continue to be put at increasing and irreversible risk.

For any recovery to be truly sustainable and resilient, the UK and Welsh governments should ensure that the rights of children, including the rights to life and to health, are at

¹⁹ NHS Digital (2020), [Mental health of children and young people in England, 2020](#)

²⁰ Nuffield Trust (2019), [Hospital admissions as a result of self-harm in children and young people](#)

²¹ Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2020), [State of child health: at a glance](#)

²² The Children's Commissioner for England (2020), [Children's mental health report warns 'chasm' remains between what services are available and what children need](#)

²³ YoungMinds (2020), [Coronavirus: Impact on young people with mental health needs](#), p. 3.

²⁴ Ibid., p.6.

²⁵ EHRC (2020), [Children's rights in Great Britain](#), p. 86.

²⁶ Watts, N., Amann, M., Arnell, N. et al. (2019), '[The 2019 Report of The Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: ensuring that the health of a child born today is not defined by a changing climate](#)', The Lancet, 16 November, vol. 394, issue 10211, pp. 1836–1878

²⁷ Unicef UK (2018), [A breath of toxic air: UK children in danger](#), p. 4

²⁸ Achakulwisut, P., Brauer, M., Hystad, P. and Anenberg, S. (2019), '[Global, national and urban burdens of paediatric asthma incidence attributable to ambient NO2 pollution estimates from global datasets](#)', The Lancet Planet Health 2019, 3: e166178

²⁹ WHO-UNICEF-Lancet Commission (2020), '[A future for the world's children?](#)', fig. 10, Lancet 2020; vol. 395, pp. 605–658; see also Howard, E., Sandler Clarke, J. and Barratt, L. (2019), '[UK set to miss raft of environmental targets in 2020 and beyond](#)', Unearthed and the Financial Times, 12 November.

the forefront of urgent decision-making and action to reduce carbon emissions and air pollution.³⁰

Goal 16: Peace, justice, and strong institutions

Before the pandemic we identified areas of concern regarding the experience of children with the justice system in Britain. For example, the use of physical restraint in the youth estate is widespread,³¹ Black children are held in custody at much higher rates than children from other ethnic groups, and violent assaults in some parts of the youth estate have increased by 70% in five years.³² About 200 allegations of sexual abuse are made each year, mostly against staff, and it has been found that complaints are rarely investigated properly.³³

The coronavirus pandemic has added to the many pressures on the youth secure estate. Children have been locked in their cells for more than 22 hours per day,³⁴ visits have been suspended, and education and therapy has been limited.³⁵ Despite legislation to enable some prisoners to be temporarily released, no children had been released by October 2020.³⁶

In response, the UK Government should improve the provision of mental health services in the youth estate, with a focus on the impact of the pandemic, publish a specific plan for resolving issues that have arisen following restrictions, and take steps to tackle violence and the use of restraint.³⁷

While the full impact of the coronavirus pandemic is not yet known, a rise in the abuse of children is one expected outcome. Evidence shows that, following the introduction of a national lockdown, reports of children living in abusive homes rose by 49%.³⁸ Despite this, there is a risk that much-needed support services for children will be increasingly difficult to access.³⁹ It is vital that if the wellbeing and futures of children are to be safeguarded following the pandemic, governments must ensure that all children who witness domestic abuse, who experience abuse or sexual violence, and who are victims of exploitation, receive appropriate support.⁴⁰

³⁰ EHRC (2020), [Children's rights in Great Britain](#), p. 93.

³¹ HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2020), [Children in Custody 2018–19 An analysis of 12–18-year-olds' perceptions of their experiences in secure training centres and young offender institutions](#), p.12.

³² Youth Justice Board and Ministry of Justice (2020), [Youth justice statistics 2018/19 England and Wales. Statistics bulletin](#), 30 January 2020

³³ IICSA (2019), [Sexual abuse of children in custodial institutions 2009-2017 investigation report](#)

³⁴ UK Government (2020), [Explanatory memorandum: The Secure Training Centre \(Coronavirus\) \(Amendment\) Rules 2020](#), 2020 No. 664; see also HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2020), [Aggregate report on short scrutiny visits: 21 April – 7 July 2020](#), p.15

³⁵ House of Commons Justice Committee (2020), [Coronavirus \(Covid-19\): The impact on prisons](#)

³⁶ Ibid. The UK Government confirmed that, as of October, no children have been released early.

³⁷ EHRC (2020), [Children's rights in Great Britain](#), pp. 63-64.

³⁸ NSPCC (2020), [Contacts to NSPCC helpline about domestic abuse up by nearly 50%](#)

³⁹ Action for Children and others, [Domestic Abuse Bill – Committee Stage Briefing](#), p.3.

⁴⁰ EHRC (2020), [Children's rights in Great Britain](#), pp. 100-105.

Further information

The Equality and Human Rights Commission is a statutory body established under the Equality Act 2006. Find out more about our work on [our website](#).

Explore [HumanRightsTracker](#), a searchable online tool where anyone can learn more about human rights in Britain, and where the UK's human rights obligations and SDG commitments can be cross-referenced. As Britain faces a future of uncertainty and ever faster and deeper change, we are calling on all human rights actors to use [HumanRightsTracker](#) to hold the UK and Welsh governments to account.

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