

LEFT OUT AND LOCKED DOWN

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 LOCKDOWN FOR
MARGINALISED GROUPS IN SCOTLAND

Report of the Scotland in Lockdown Study
December 2020



Executive Summary

17 December 2020

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In our own lives as well as in this research, the pandemic has made us acutely aware of our interconnectedness, and dependence on each other professionally and personally. We hope our work doing this research honours and nurtures this.

– Sarah Armstrong and Lucy Pickering (December 2020)



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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1 Background

- This study was funded by the Chief Scientist Office, Scottish Government, as part of its Rapid Research in Covid-19 Programme and was conducted between July and December 2020. The study was completed by a team of researchers at the University of Glasgow and supported by 20 partners from the third sector.
- The research focused on the impact of Covid-19 restrictions ('lockdown') for four groups already experiencing exclusion, isolation and marginalisation: people having a disability or long-term health condition (DHC); People involved in criminal justice (CJS); Refugees and people seeking asylum who were at risk of destitution (RAD); People surviving domestic abuse or sexual violence (DASV).
- As a rapid research project, the study aims to understand and report on the impacts of Covid-19 restrictions as they are happening, in order to contribute to better responses to it; the analysis presented may be further developed and modified.
- It has been recognised that social research is needed alongside medical and health research to understand the effects of this pandemic on individual and collective wellbeing. Already evidence has established that social inequalities are shaping Covid-19 risk and impact, but the evidence base is not yet well-established for Scotland.

2 Methods

- The focal point of this qualitative research evolved as the pandemic developed, and came to be focused on exploring: Experiences and impacts of lockdown; Service access and provision; Information sources, trust and accessibility.
- Multiple methods of investigation included: interviews (136), surveys of organisations (63) and prisoners (86), letters (10) and social media analysis. Researching during a pandemic has limitations and required flexibility in data collection. The study has produced a rich, diverse data set (letters, emails, audio and video).
- Interviews included people directly affected by one of the study issues or staff who worked in related services.
- An organisational survey captured perspectives of service providers working during the pandemic.
- Social media analysis explored how organisations used Twitter to respond to the pandemic and support populations.

- Partners in the research supplied additional, valuable data, not all of which was able to be included in the present report.
- The study was ethically reviewed and approved through the University of Glasgow's MVLS Research Ethics Committee. We adopted a feminist ethics of care in this research which extends to: research participants, to whom there is a commitment of allowing them to articulate their experiences in a safe and empathetic setting; research users, committing to openness, transparency and accessibility; and to the research team itself, encouraging a supportive, collegial ethos.

3 Cross-cutting Issues: Information, Experiences and Services

- Information serves as a gatekeeper to people's ability to navigate the risks of Covid-19 as well as a mediator for how people think or feel about these risks.
 - There was differential access to, comprehension of, and control over information for the four groups and as a result varying levels of trust in information sources.
 - Common sources of information included television, news reports, the Scottish Government's daily briefing, social media, the internet, and social networks, friends, support networks and third sector organisations.
 - People were both saturated with information and the changing nature of information as well as wanted more information, about Covid risks *as well as* how to support themselves and their communities.
 - Access to information varied in terms of who controlled it, whether it was in accessible formats, and whether one had means to pay for the technology to consume it.
- Experiences varied but a shared theme was of lives of both *continuity* of pre-existing hardship, and *change* in terms of intensifying challenge through growing constraint of already circumscribed lives.
 - Lives were put on hold through delays in key processes for and requirements in participants' lives. Those already entrenched in state mediated systems or reliant on third sector support were heavily impacted by delays, worsening access to healthcare, asylum decisions, prison release, court cases and more.
 - Others felt nothing changed in their lives, but described deepening forms of isolation, neglect, and worsening life circumstances. Feelings of powerlessness increased.
 - The disruption, delays and unpredictability of life under Covid-19 profoundly increased worry and anxiety (about Covid and other health issues) for oneself and loved ones, with consequences for overall worsening mental health.
 - Unequal access to digital technologies had significant effects on isolation and access to friends, family, and groups, compounding already existing

economic disparities with unequal access to social life, connection and support.

- Families were significantly impacted, with people having to make difficult choices about where family members would live, lack of respite and support for single parents, and confinement due to shielding, lack of access to accessible outdoor space and other resources.
- Services were stopped, slowed, or contracted, despite need expanding and intensifying.
 - Needs of money, digital equipment, food and mental health support increased significantly, with the third sector and community groups playing an important role in supplying these.
 - Third sector organisations generally mobilised quickly and with agility to plug gaps left by the slowing down and contraction of statutory services.
 - Many participants noted and praised support from charities, neighbours and communities, keeping people from the brink of serious hardship, but help also seemed to be a matter of chance for some.
 - Technological adaptation to the pandemic enabled vital services to continue and facilitated inclusion of some of those formerly unable to engage with services, but barriers persisted. These related not only to equipment or Wi-Fi access, but also involved social, medical and cultural constraints.
 - Services cancelled or seen as 'non-essential', like public libraries and health services directed towards wellbeing, actually supported people in fundamental ways with their loss have large negative impacts.

4 Disability and Long-term Conditions

- Data comes from 45 interviews (40 from the disabled community and 5 staff in support services). Participants were mostly female (70%), and 84% identified as White/Scottish, with just under a third (32%) living alone.
- The disabled community and those with long-term conditions (LTC) experienced significant marginalisation, exclusion and barriers to realising their rights to live with dignity and autonomy *prior* to the pandemic. The pandemic exacerbated pre-existing inequalities for the majority of participants.
- Everyday lives were profoundly affected by lockdown. Disruption to services, lost contact, increased isolation, and fewer provisions existed to maintain wellbeing and impacted levels of mental distress and loneliness (and contributed to feeling forgotten and invisible).
- People with disabilities and LTC also innovated solutions as active agents of change, navigating lockdown and the continual shifting barriers in front of them.
- Despite cuts and financial constraints, voluntary/third sector organisations were vitally important, pivoting to focus on providing material support – food, digital

access, social contact – as well as bringing attention to the impact of pandemic responses on these groups and often being the only points of contact for the most isolated.

5 Criminal Justice-involved

- Data comes from surveys of those serving prison sentences during lockdown (86); interviews of recently released or on licence during lockdown or under community justice supervision (15), and those with a family member in prison (6) as well as staff in organisations supporting these groups (11).
- People subject to criminal justice control and their families had traumatising and punitive experiences during lockdown, making sentences more severe.
- Those in prison felt an increased risk of exposure to Covid-19 infection, without having means to mitigate it, especially in relation to hygiene. Many felt pandemic-related measures were experienced as increased control, rather than effective care.
- Prisoners reported being locked in cells for up to 23½ hours per day, with little opportunity for engagement or activity. Prisoners also lost family visits and had to navigate alternative forms of contact. Thus prisoners have experienced deeper forms of isolation (and further away from life outside), resulting in a heavier and crushing form of imprisonment, as well as increased anxiety about family members' risk of Covid-19 in the community.
- Those in prison and people under supervision have had an increased sense of their lives in suspension, stiling their progress towards a life beyond punishment.
- Statutory services have, for the most part, offered significantly less support to people in prison and under supervision, narrowing their focus to monitoring risks. Small groups and community organisations have responded to gaps in service, seeing increases in referrals as well as needs of those involved in criminal justice processes.

6 Refugees and People Seeking Asylum

- Data comes from 27 interviews (with an even gender division) with people at different stages of the asylum process or with refugee status, and 3 staff interviews from service support groups. Interviewees came from 14 different countries across the globe. Many were living in temporary accommodation, were not working, and dependent on aid.
- Poverty was a key issue for refugees and those seeking asylum and this issue impacted access to food, technology and information, and other basic needs. Temporary housing, like hotels, contributed to people's sense of displacement, loss of agency, and added trauma and a sense of isolation.
- Those going through the asylum process explained it was already a difficult and isolating experience, however the impacts of lockdown exacerbated the sense of 'life

on hold', compounding the uncertainty about the future, and increased people's increased anxiety.

- Many participants lost access to language classes, college, and volunteering opportunities, leading to a loss of structure and routine, as well as opportunities to improve their English and contribute to and practice care for others in society.
- People seeking asylum and refugees already feel an acute sense of loss for their country of origin, and for loss of opportunities to get on living new lives and building new futures caused by lockdown. Lockdown further compounded the felt hostilities of the immigration system and negated positive experiences and opportunities people had been experiencing in a new place.
- Third sector organisations tried to meet the needs of immigrant populations through innovation. Organisations are often providing vital support due to state absence and withdrawal in provision of social welfare.

7 Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence

- Data comes from 30 interviews (12 survivors and 18 staff in support services). Survivors varied in living situation and circumstances for experiencing abuse, with nearly all living apart from their abuser (11), though some were still in contact with and experiencing abuse (6). One was still living with the abuser and all were living with their school-age children.
- Safety was a critical issue for this population. Abuse intensified for those living with abusers during lockdown, or occurred with Covid-19 restrictions through online platforms, or via manipulation of child contact arrangements.
- Increased safety was reported by some survivors not living with abusive partners since restrictions on movement and limitations on child contact provided a level of protection.
- Adverse impacts of Covid-19 restrictions included exacerbation of delays and uncertainties in criminal and civil justice processes; economic difficulties and responsibilities of lone parenting; and the 'triggering' effect of the pandemic which mirror experiences and impacts of abuse.
- Access to services and support has been varied. For women in employment, mothers and those living in rural locations with access to appropriate digital technologies and internet access, the move to online provision has improved access to support.
- Digital exclusion is a major issue for survivors experiencing poverty or other forms of marginalisation (e.g., women who are homeless, and refugee and asylum-seeking women).
- DASV services adapted rapidly via online service provision yet services are under additional pressure, with practical support taking precedence over therapeutic support. As restrictions ease, it is likely that there will be a surge in demand for therapeutic support, refuge space and criminal justice protections.

8 Organisational Experiences & Views

- A survey was completed by organisations providing services to the groups involved in the research. A total of 63 responses were received from 56 organisations between August and October 2020.
- Many of the respondent organisations were fairly small in size with 0-2 staff or less than £500,000 annual budgets, underlining the vulnerability not just of people but of the services they rely on.
- Organisations expressed high levels of concern about funding over the next 12 months, some noting emergency funding had now been spent.
- Whilst many respondents expressed pride in the ability of the third sector to respond quickly in the face of pandemic, working under this pressure had significant personal costs: over 60% reported high levels of stress/anxiety, and 57% said home life and relationships were affected. Managing childcare responsibilities was a concern for parents, but isolation while doing challenging work was a concern for those living on their own.
- All respondents reported significant changes to their services, suspending some, adapting others and initiating new services. This was in response both to new needs (for food, money, digital access) of people using their services, and reduced capacity or impossibility of running other services (training, social activities).
- Service providers had high levels of concern for people they worked with, observing intensification of the challenges people already struggling were facing. There was a concern as well about groups becoming invisible, and individuals going missing from service engagement.
- Nearly all respondents reported loss of statutory services and support, which has increased pressure on the third sector as well as increased the challenges faced by their constituencies.
- Most respondents identified positives of how pandemic restrictions had led to improvements in working or sped up planned technological changes. The degree to which communities and the third sector came together to respond collaboratively to the pandemic was also praised.

9 Organisational Use of Social Media

- This analysis is based on gathering all Twitter posts of five organisations working in the areas covered in the study. It provides a historical archive of the actions these partners took as the pandemic unfolded from their first mention of Covid-19 through to the end of August 2020.
- The organisations were: Diabetes Scotland, Health and Social Care Alliance, Maryhill Integration Network, the Scottish Prisoner Advocacy and Research Collective, and the Poverty Alliance.

- Through posts and re-tweets, organisations shared and tailored information about Covid-19 to their constituencies. They also alerted their communities to alternative services and adaptations to restrictions.
- Twitter activity reflected a great deal of collective and cooperative working among organisations in different areas, helping to circulate, interpret, refine and sometimes challenge government and scientific information.
- Twitter provides an example of one space in which organisations could announce and amplify their Covid-19-related activism and campaigning. Through these efforts, they sought to expose the injustices, hardships and anxieties experienced by their communities. They then sought to generate, disseminate and mobilise evidence of these experiences in campaigns directed at authorities who have the power to mitigate suffering.

10 Implications & Concluding Messages

- For the excluded groups we studied, our research found a defining feature is the twinned experience of precarity *and* resilience, activism *and* disempowerment.
- We identify implications of lockdown for different timeframes. In the short-term, people are mainly trying to avert the catastrophe that illness, lockdown, or destitution can bring. Many are finding adaptations and holding on thanks to their own efforts and informal and third sector forms of support. The medium-term is marked by uncertainty and limbo.
- Over the long-term, we speculate about the emergence of a social form of 'long covid', where accumulating consequences of lockdown play out over an extended period. The damage endured now, may be storing up a heavy toll, creating need for adequate support and resources well after the pandemic.
- Systems on which people depend often were experienced as constraining and disabling, sometimes actively facilitating a sense of self-blame or responsibility or obstructing independence and autonomy. There are implications for rights and dignity in how people are engaged in systemic processes.
- Isolation came up continuously and takes on particular forms of intensity for the groups in this study. Isolation and wider inequalities appeared to be interdependent and should be recognised and incorporated into policy responses.
- Money and housing were basic needs and disproportionately inadequate for people in the study, and therefore constitute primary areas of focus for developing a supportive response.
- Fundamental weaknesses and erosions of wider systems shaped experiences of the pandemic, and if these are addressed, could further support the coming together of communities, services and people that has happened so far, fostering a sense of hope and solidarity in facing crises beyond Covid-19.

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