

In this blog, Dr Gabriela Misca, Senior Lecturer in Psychology, University of Worcester and Expert Adviser to the Commission, introduces current research into how lockdowns have impacted families in ways not seen before.

The Archbishops' Commission on Families and Households has recognised that the global COVID-19 pandemic will have challenged how families are able to flourish. Looking back over the past 2 years, since March 2020, there can be no doubt that COVID-19 heralded a major health crisis and also a significant social and economic crisis across the globe.

Emerging research has documented how recurrent lockdowns have impacted families and relationships in unprecedented ways. The imposed social isolation forced some people to live closer together within the confines of their households while others were separated for a considerable time. In addition, many families had to cope with the increased burden of care as a result of quarantines, the need to shield vulnerable family members, or look after adults and children with physical and/or mental health needs. In addition, parents who were not front-line workers were required to provide home-schooling for their children while also working from home.

Families found themselves navigating these “new challenges” without any preparation, and while some have done so with remarkable strength and resilience, for others these challenges have aggravated existing tensions or resulted in new stresses. The idea of home as a 'safe haven' has been challenged as the pandemic shone a light on the home space a potential place of family conflict and abuse. This led to early concerns about how the high-pressure environment of confinement may lead to a rise in relationship breakdown, marital conflict, domestic violence and child abuse and neglect.

With vaccination heralding a return to a “new normal”, the task ahead is to shape a positive post-pandemic future, and this can only be achieved by putting forward interventions and supports for individuals and families which can mitigate the negative effects of COVID-19 on society and reduce their long-term impact.

It is within this context that the Families Un-locked study was established at the University of Worcester to investigate how families and households have coped with the pandemic and how they will play a critical role in “shaping the COVID decade”, with the ultimate aim of informing the development of interventions to support family life.

A brief overview of the Families Un-locked study

The Families Un-locked study is grounded in a family resilience approach, which provides a lens through which theorists, researchers, and practitioners understand and help families promote positive adaptation to adversity. By focusing on families and households, the research is exploring both how individuals reacted/adapted to the challenges brought about by the pandemic across varied domains of functioning (health and wellbeing, couple relationships, parenting, caring, occupational), and also how these challenges reverberated and were negotiated within their family.

Although exploratory in nature, this interdisciplinary study employs rigorous assessment of outcomes by using both bespoke and standardised

instruments, thus allowing comparison with other studies and population norms across a range of domains: health and wellbeing - including mental health, trauma, resilience, and loneliness; family functioning - including marital/couple relationships and parenting; occupational - including the impact of 'working from home', furlough and job loss; and pandemic related domains such as COVID- anxiety, loneliness, bereavement and long-covid. The study looks specifically at key workers, a group affected in different ways . The first wave of the study began in August 2020 and a second wave in February 2021. Around 1,800 UK participants aged between 18-88 have participated, recruited via a range of stakeholders. The study is ongoing and data analysis is at an early stage.

Key Findings

This blog reports some initial headline findings relevant to the Commission's work on individual and family flourishing. These relate to: everyday family life; mental health; couple relationships; children's education; and bereavement.

1. Everyday family life

Although lockdown restrictions attempted to preserve some limited opportunities to be active and exercise, study participants reported doing less exercise as compared to before the pandemic. Slightly concerning is that after the easing of lockdowns, few people reported that they were doing more exercise. This suggests that for about a third of our sample exercising less had become a habit. This change in behaviour seems to be linked to the finding that people were spending increased amounts of time watching TV (broadly defined to include streaming etc) during lockdowns and after restrictions were lifted.

Similarly about a third of people reported that they were eating and drinking more during the lockdowns and this behaviour had not reduced significantly after they eased and remains higher than before the pandemic. The combination of less exercise, more eating and drinking is a cause for concern in respect of health issues:

'I now drink alcohol in the home, not just when out for a meal'

Some people noted, nevertheless, some un-intended positive effects of the much-publicised link between obesity and risk of COVID complications, which appears to have encouraged them to adopt healthier lifestyles:

'[I] lost 3 stone as I worried about catching COVID. I realised that being overweight was affecting my chance of surviving covid as well as affecting my other health issues, and decided to try and lose weight'

A third of people reported spending more time on their hobbies and more quality time with people in their household during the pandemic and this appears to be sustained throughout and beyond the pandemic period.

The pandemic also offered opportunities to reshape everyday life – for example, by changing perceptions about work:

'The quality and quantity of work I produced improved dramatically [by working from home] because there was less time-wasting associated with work meetings and emails.'

2. Feelings and mental health

We asked people to reflect on their feelings and mental states during lockdowns. About a quarter reported feeling lonely and anxious most of the time during lockdown and over the pandemic period. These feelings did not appear to subside after the easing of lockdowns. Worries about money and employment appear to be a constant concern, reflecting how people experienced the economic consequence of the pandemic. Moreover, about a third of respondents felt pessimistic and reported that they did not feel positive about the future.

Interestingly, people described how they had felt worried, stressed, and helpless but also indicated that they had felt happy and resilient some of the time. This suggests a complex picture of emotions over the period. Perspectives on the pandemic, the virus and its handling varied with some people criticising the behaviour of others or arguing about the realities of the virus:

'[I am] frustrated at the selfishness I have seen from others'

'[I have been} arguing with friends about the realities of the pandemic, conflicting perspectives'

3. Couple relationships

When exploring how couples had experienced the lockdowns, the predominant picture was of couples arguing, worrying and feeling tension. When asked to rate their overall perception of the pandemic on their relationship, a third of participants reported that the lockdown had exacerbated pre-existing issues, putting their relationship at risk of breakdown:

'Our treatment of each other deteriorated around the third lockdown. The stress of isolating brought out other issues in the relationship.'

'Being together all the time made it difficult to walk away from arguments'

'[A] stressful working pattern has led to frustrations spilling into home life.'

On the other hand a similar proportion of couples felt that lockdowns had been a positive experience and said that they were closer than before the pandemic.

'Initially we were arguing more and did have some difficulties but we learned a lot about each other, how to communicate, how to adapt to new way of life and we are much stronger now I think.'

4. Children's education

The vast majority of parents in the study had enjoyed spending time with their children but two thirds had found it difficult to balance childcare with working from home and felt overwhelmed as a result.

When asked in more detail about the difficulties they had experienced, parents reported feeling anxious about their children's education, and they had found it difficult to create a structured environment for their children, which we know is important for their learning. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of parents described how their children had felt unsettled. This may have been due to the parents themselves feeling stressed and anxious, indicating intergenerational transmission. During the later lockdowns, there is evidence that parents had on-going worries about their children's mental health, online activity and schooling:

'Initially we struggled as the children felt they don't have to do work, there was a lot of telling off, crying, shouting... but soon enough we got into a routine'

'My son coped well with first the lock down but the second one was very difficult. I was concerned for his mental health.'

5. Bereavement

In wave 2 of the study we looked in more detail at life events over the pandemic period and bereavement emerged as having been very challenging for families due to the restrictions imposed:

'My father had gone into a nursing home shortly before lockdown. He missed his family and stopped eating when we couldn't get in to see him and died within 4 weeks.'

Some people had experienced multiple bereavements over a short period of time:

'[My] friend died of cancer; Mother died from COVID, both in the same week'

Family members and friends did not have the usual opportunities to engage with grieving rituals, raising concerns about the effects of unresolved grief:

'My husband also lost his Gran. He was only able to wave at his Gran through a window a few weeks prior to her death. Due to limited numbers allowed at funerals I had to stay at home whilst he attended and they held a short illegal family wake in a Homebase carpark.'

Dealing with death and bereavement has been particularly difficult for frontline keyworkers in health and social care as the comment below illustrates:

'[I] work as a specialist paramedic for the ambulance service. Saw too many people die last year and still patients dying now. Also two colleagues died due

to covid, leaving behind families etc'.

Concluding comments

While every individual and family will have their own story about life during the pandemic, the data from this study highlight key common impacts irrespective of an individual's or a family's personal circumstances. Covid-19 has been no respecter of social, economic or geographical boundaries, but we also aware of the interaction between racial and social inequalities and the increased risk of mortality.

The pandemic has seen individual loss and collective trauma. Individuals and families with mental health issues, living in poor and overcrowded homes and without adequate financial resources have found it much harder to be resilient. As the study continues these and other issues will be explored in more depth and the findings offered to inform the work of the Commission.

Dr Gabriela Misca, is expert in child and family psychology at the University of Worcester, UK. Recipient of a 2015-16 Fulbright Scholar Award, she spent a year in the USA researching military and veteran families. During 2019-2020 she worked on the Living in Our Shoes, an independent review commissioned by the Ministry of Defence into understanding the needs of UK Armed Forces families, which has informed the UK Armed Forces Families Strategy 2022-32. In recognition of her research into Armed Forces families and its impact, she is (joint)recipient of the 2021 Special Award for FiMpacT by Forces in Mind Trust.

Dr Misca writes in her personal capacity and her views are not necessarily those of the Archbishops or of the Church of England.

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