A ticking time bomb of future harm: Lockdown, child abuse and future violence

Abstract: The Covid-19 pandemic and the implementation of national lockdowns has generated significant changes in the citizenry's material realities. Although the efficacy of lockdown is yet to be determined, emerging evidence points to a rise in unintended harms such as increased child abuse and neglect. Indeed, reported incidences of child abuse in many countries across the world have increased as at-risk children are confined to their dwelling for significant periods of time with a violent perpetrator. Drawing on recently developed theories that indicate a mediated causal link between childhood trauma and a commitment to violent behaviour in later life, particularly in young men, this article claims lockdown may be an unintended 'violence generating mechanism' that might potentially manifest itself in increased violent outbursts in the future. First, the article briefly outlines how lockdowns have impacted upon societies. It then explores the statistical upsurge in child abuse and neglect, including afar as Croatia, South Africa, New Zealand, China, Uganda, Nepal and the United Kingdom. The paper closes with a discussion of the empirical evidence that demonstrates a link between childhood trauma and violence in later life, concluding that lockdowns may act as a *ticking time bomb of future harm*.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic represents the most significant global event so far in the 21st century and one that is likely to ignite considerable social and economic change within societies (Schwab & Malleret, 2020). Since the first confirmed cases in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December 2019, numerous states across the world have entered a prolonged period of profound crisis and uncertainty. At the time of writing, John Hopkins University has recorded almost 100 million cases of Covid-19 globally with in excess of 2 million deaths attributed to the disease. Initially, in the absence of effective treatments and vaccines, numerous states imposed a range of measures designed to reduce the transmission rate; social distancing, travel restrictions, self-isolation, curfews and face masks have become part of daily existence for many. Despite the recent roll out of several approved vaccines in a number of states, fears about new variants of the virus mean that intermittent restrictions on social life may have to continue for some time.

Arguably the most dramatic and perhaps controversial measure is the implementation of lockdowns, which, despite the unintended harms that result, has yet to receive any efficacy evaluation (Herat, 2020; Sharma, 2020). Lockdowns curb peoples' freedoms, and - perhaps understandably as some argue in the current climate - were necessary as a means to break the chain of infection and allow health systems to cope with an anticipated steep rise in hospital admissions (Ferguson et al., 2020; Moser & Yared, 2020). However, lockdowns have not escaped criticism. On a policy-level, some have argued that lockdown pronouncements were underpinned by inadequate and poor-quality datasets as well as unreliable modelling (Kuhbandner et al., 2020). Furthermore,

containment strategies adopted without careful consideration of national socio-economic and cultural contexts negatively impacted the efficacy of lockdown, both in terms of the emergence of significant social and economic hardship and the unsuccessful curtailment of virus transmission (Ghosh, 2020).

Lockdowns immediately remove people from their daily routines and thrust upon them a new set of material conditions. Even if some are able to cultivate coping mechanisms and new routines to deal with sudden change such as spending more time watching Netflix and online shopping (Briggs, et al., 2020; Mutz & Gerke, 2020), research so far has found generally increased stress and anxiety levels in a wide range of different social groups as a result of these measures (Gaidhane et al., 2020; Marchetti et al., 2020; Shanahan et al., 2020). The outbreak of Covid-19, and measures taken in response, have exacerbated pre-pandemic inequalities (Schwab & Malleret, 2020) and exposed the considerable differences between social groups, both in terms of their exposure to the virus and the detrimental impact of lockdown measures (see Ali et al., 2020; Briggs et al., 2020; Chiou & Tucker, 2020; Ramaswamy & Seshadri, 2020). For example, the lockdown in Italy – one of the worst affected countries in Europe – was followed by significant increases in poverty and inequality as many already-poor households went without both governmental support and food (Brunori et al., 2020).

Concern is growing as emerging evidence indicates that lockdowns have had unanticipated and underestimated costs, including contributing to projected increases in avoidable deaths as a result of diagnostic delays, increased mental health issues, increased consumption of drugs and/or alcohol, and increased domestic abuse (Campbell, 2020; Green, 2020; Maringe et al., 2020; Petrowski et al., 2020). Without wanting to discount the significance of the former outcomes, it is the latter, violent abuse and neglect of children, to which we devote our attention in this article.

Our contention is that recorded increases in the abuse and neglect of children - as both victims and witnesses - during the pandemic, should be considered part of a group of 'violence generating mechanisms' (Eisner & Nivette, 2020) with the potential to catalyse future forms of violence (also see Green, 2020). We begin by briefly reviewing the current work to date on child abuse and neglect during the Covid-19 pandemic period, giving particular attention to the impact of lockdowns, before discussing the possible generative nature of this abuse through existing theories addressing the relationship between early trauma and violence, principally in the lives of young men.

The secondary pandemic: Child abuse and neglect during Covid-19 lockdowns

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was estimated that around one billion children and young people (aged 2-17) across the world had experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence or neglect (Hillis et al., 2016). The ensuing Covid-19 crisis and, in particular, measures taken because of it, have the potential to exacerbate this number, both in the short term (during the pandemic) and the medium to long term (as the trauma experienced by many of these children and young people later manifests itself in a reproduction of violence). This reflects what Green (2020, p. 1) calls the *"secondary pandemic of child neglect and abuse"* or the *"secondary harm being done to the adults of the future"*.

While Covid-19 lockdown measures may limit the risks for virus contagion, they have the potential to confine children to a domestic dwelling for a lengthy period of time with a violent perpetrator (Campbell, 2020; Usher et al., 2020). Indeed, The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (2020) warned that the impact of the pandemic risks increasing rates of child abuse, as well as the possibility of children experiencing neglect and/or witnessing violence between family members. Feminist research, in particular, has unequivocally demonstrated the dangers that are present within the familial home (Wykes and Welsh, 2009). Despite the suggestion of sanctity, *"the homes we live in are almost as likely to be places of rage, conflict and dispute as they are of sustenance, nurturing and safety"* (Atkinson, 2012, p. 243). Children in families subject to a history of 'patriarchal terrorism' (Ray, 2011) are significantly at risk during the pandemic. The immediate and sudden restrictions placed upon movement and prolonged confinement to domestic space may provoke negative changes to the family dynamic, including increased/added exposure to a violent perpetrator. Concerns over finances and employment may also induce stress and further heighten the possibility of conflict within families (De Cao & Sandner, 2020; Jentsch & Schnock, 2020; Petrowski et al., 2020).

Evidence gathered from studies conducted so far, albeit subject to caution due to widely acknowledged limitations in recording and reporting mechanisms (Lund et al., 2020), largely confirms these predictions. Trends in Croatia confirm that reported rates of family violence in which the children were victims rose 35% to 502% (Dapić et al., 2020). Childline South Africa reported a 400% increase in calls within the first week of its lockdown and identified a 62% increase in child abuse and neglect cases (Bega et al., 2020). While 53% of Indian children were found to have experienced different kinds of abuse prior to the pandemic, such as nude photography, assault, inappropriate touching and abuse, during the country's lockdown Childline India Foundation reported a 50% increase in calls for assistance (Podder & Mukherjee, 2020). Furthermore, in those cases in which a perpetrator was prosecuted by the Indian courts in this period, 93% were relatives or known individuals (Unni, 2020).

Meanwhile, Xue et al. (2020) analysed over 1 million tweets regarding family violence such as child abuse, assault, coercive control and physical aggression during the first lockdown, specifically from April-July 2020. They enumerate that family violence is on the rise; many of the tweets outlined how vulnerable individuals are more at risk because of financial constraints and quarantine rules brought by lockdown. Other research highlights how family violence increased across China during the lockdown, principally perpetrated by males: as support services diminished, the needs of victims of violence were neglected (Zhang, 2020). Relatedly, Every-Palmer et al. (2020) conducted survey-based research in New Zealand – 1 in 10 respondents had endured family violence such as physical abuse and sexual assault during lockdown.

In Uganda – a country which experienced one of the world's most stringent lockdowns – there was a 13-fold increase in the number of child abuse and neglect calls made to the Uganda Child Helpline (from on average 100 calls a day to 1369) during the lockdown period (Seerwanja et al., 2020). Research in the UK in response to the first lockdown imposed in March 2020 found increased reports of violence between intimates, including from child to parent or carer (Condry et al., 2020). While police recorded crime

data showed an increase in domestic-abuse related offences during the pandemic, it was acknowledged that this may be reflective of changes in police recording practices for such offences (Office for National Statistics, 2020a). Similarly, other commentators suggest that vulnerable children in the UK are subject to a *"prolonged exposure to potential harm"* (Romanou & Belton, 2020, p. 4), since both access to protective services and time spent outside the household has contracted.

It should be noted that the *dark figure* of child abuse during the lockdown is unknown, since statistics alone can only award researchers a helpful but conservative estimate (Ellis, 2016). This is particularly the case during lockdowns as the difficulties in reporting the injustices documented above have potentially been intensified because perpetrators monitor victims' communications, deterring them from contacting support services, in addition to the restrictions upon leaving dwellings. While American research has highlighted a decrease in the reporting of child abuse, Campbell (2020, p. 2) suggests that 'unfortunately, this decrease may be a result of fewer opportunities for detection' rather than an actual drop in cases. Relatedly, the three-month lockdown in Nepal from March 24th to June 14th resulted in 885 complaints of abuse from young women and girls: twice the number received from the previous quarter of December 2019 to February 2020 and this, the authors suggest, is considered vastly underreported (Dahel, et al., 2020). Contrarily, several German studies (see Hell et al., 2020; Mairhofer et al., 2020) report statistical decreases in child abuse and neglect reporting; but they suggest this might be because of closures and restrictions placed on child-welfare agencies to undertake frontline face-to-face work and thereby identify child abuse (see also Baron et al., 2020; Zussman, 2020 for similar findings in the USA and Canada respectively).

In this respect, lockdowns also impact on the operations of social services as well as specialist child services. Their transition from home visits to 'online support' is now also thought to possibly reduce the potential for abuse cases to come to light (Donagh, 2020) at a time when there is an increased demand for services (Fore, 2020; Usher et al., 2020). With limited space for reprieve due to school, library, and church closures, as well as restrictions on accessing outdoor spaces, children may also be on the violent frontline of not only abuse they perhaps previously received prior to Covid-19, but also as a result of the pressures caused by the pandemic, such as an amplification of stress due to household unemployment, reduced or limited income, restricted support and social interaction in general (De Cao & Sandner, 2020). In light of this evidence, the next section will draw upon theories of trauma and violence to ask whether current lockdowns inadvertently activate a *ticking time bomb of future harm*.

A ticking time bomb? Trauma, Violence and Economic Hardship

While considering the possible connections between the pandemic and violence, Eisner and Nivette (2020) allude to both immediate and more distant generators of violent behaviour. The immediate onset of the pandemic and lockdowns transformed day-to-day situational conditions and routine activities in ways that reduced – as well as also generated - opportunities for violence. Early evidence indicates some societies experienced considerable declines in public violence (Eisner & Nivette, 2020), while the previous section suggests a potentially opposite trend for private violence which is

partially-attributable to the greater amount of time spent indoors. Importantly, Eisner and Nivette's report draws attention towards proximally more distant 'violence-promoting mechanisms' that will likely build up gradually as the longer-term subjective and social effects of the pandemic begin to be felt, such as *"stress, depression, anger, hunger…loss of employment, social contact, and hope"* (Eisner & Nivette, 2020, p. 3).

The pandemic has already severely affected national economies. States have initiated a range of fiscal stimulus packages to cover the costs of the public health response and to support individual citizens unable to work and businesses at risk of permanent closure. As a result, the financial costs of the pandemic will be considerable. In the UK, for example, the Institute for Government (Lilly et al., 2020) has reported recently that the costs to the UK government in 2020/21 alone will be in the region of £317.4 billion. Labour market indicators in the UK also present a concerning picture. Since the pandemic began, the number of individuals classed as unemployed has increased with 318,000 more people registered unemployed in September 2020 compared with the same period a year earlier (ONS, 2020b). Furthermore, a record number of redundancies (314,000) were registered in the period from July – September 2020 (ONS, 2020b). Social-scientific evidence indicates associations between economic downturns, a paucity of secure legitimate work opportunities, disruption to social institutions, and increased violence (Currie, 2016). As Schwab and Malleret (2020, p. 84) suggest about the aforementioned social and economic impacts of the pandemic: *"when people have no jobs, no income and no prospects for a better life, they often resort to violence"*. How these 'promoting mechanisms' are addressed by states will therefore likely prove significant in determining the level of social unrest and violence that may manifest in the future particularly if labour markets and support services continue to diminish.

Traumatic intimate abuse must be added to the aforementioned list of 'promoting mechanisms' for the generative risks that it poses. Psychological trauma may result from a range of adverse experiences, including experiencing or witnessing abuse, and will not necessarily manifest in negative internalising or externalising behaviour (Greenwald, 2002). However, exposure to more frequent and intense adverse and traumatic experiences during early life is likely to negatively impact upon mental health (Cecil et al., 2017). A considerable body of evidence now indicates that there is a possible mediated association between early trauma, specifically violent victimisation, and violence perpetration later in life, particularly amongst males (Ellis, 2016; Ellis et al., 2017; Walsh, 2020; Winlow, 2014).

Trauma induced through severe parental abuse and neglect can severely disrupt fundamental processes for acquiring empathy and self-control (Stein, 2007). Severely abused and traumatised children may also experience difficulty with 'self-soothing' in the absence of sufficient external comfort from an empathetic and responsive caregiver (Bollas, 1995). Stein (2007) has argued that extreme and habitual dissociation becomes a means through which severely traumatised individuals may manage and defend against the memories of these experiences. Whilst the victim may be more likely to encounter mental health problems, self-harm and use drugs problematically in later life (Ayres, 2020), aggression is another potential response to the hypersensitive state traumatised individuals can subsequently experience, in which minor or neutral stimuli may be mis-interpreted (Greenwald, 2002). Indeed, stressful situations generate *"powerful emotions"*

that in acutely traumatised individuals *"may come to be registered as emanating from other people, who are then perceived as causative agents of one's internal distress"* (Stein, 2007, p. 118).

Similarly, De-Zulueta (2006, p. 5) has argued that memories of past abuse that are dissociated *"can be processed into rage...when triggered by the appropriate stimuli"*. Whilst the underlying psychic mechanisms of trauma and violence are becoming better understood, there remains a need to acknowledge both the influence of gender, particularly masculinity, upon this association (Walsh, 2020) and traumatic abuse which can lead to forms of future violence. Numerous research studies indicate overwhelmingly that violence, particularly persistent and more harmful violence, is largely the preserve of males (Currie, 2016; Ellis, 2016; Winlow, 2014). Most serious violence recorded internationally is committed by males; yet, they are most often the victims of homicide too (UNODC, 2019), leading Walsh (2020, p. 191) to conclude that *"violence is pervasive, and is the most commonly experienced trauma by boys and young men"*. It is highly likely then that violence arising in part from the impact of pandemic lockdowns will be perpetrated predominantly by already vulnerable, at-risk males who have been most adversely affected.

Moreover, evidence suggests harsh parenting styles and experiencing violence at home increases the risks of male children behaving violently in the future both at home and in public (Gadd et al., 2013; Fulwiler, 2003; McPhedran, 2009) as does research on the effects of witnessing violence committed by others in the community (Gibson et al., 2009). In-depth qualitative research with persistently violent males in deprived communities in the north of England explored the symbolism of early trauma in their accounts of violence (Ellis et al., 2017). In the study, many of the men attached great significance to their early experiences of being physically abused both within the home and the immediate neighbourhood. The inability to act or defend themselves from physically superior attackers was a source of humiliation that structured their perceptions and subsequent interactions with others (see also Winlow, 2014). They would often seek out a surrogate victim who could act as an approximation of their past abuser(s) and receive the violence they wished they could have inflicted in the past (Ellis et al., 2017). It is this combination of biography, environment and exposure to traumatic events in childhood that underpins this theory of violence (Winlow, 2014; Ellis et al., 2017) and thus provides a framework for us to at least speculate that increased incidence of child abuse and neglect during the lockdown may have significant negative long-term consequences.

Conclusion

In this article, we have opened up space for discussion and future research on the relationship between abuse during lockdown and future violence. It appears to us as though the pieces are in place for this consideration: research on violent subjectivities has increasingly acknowledged the role of trauma, often in childhood, on subsequent emotional development and violent behaviour, particularly amongst young men in deprived localities (Ellis, 2016; Ellis et al., 2017). Meanwhile, early research on childhood

abuse during the pandemic has indicated both a worldwide upswing in reported cases and the likelihood of a significant 'dark figure' of abuse and neglect (Condry et al., 2020).

Although designed to limit the transmission of Covid-19, lockdowns may catalyse future forms of violence by altering daily routines and exposing children to greater physical and emotional abuse. As emergent statistics indicate this upward trend, we have speculated that lockdown may act as a delayed or distant 'violence generating mechanism', storing up problems for an increasingly uncertain future. In effect, the consequence could be a greater proportion of severely traumatised and neglected young men within the population, growing up with few prospects and reduced legitimate opportunities, which greatly increases the possibility of future violence. If fragments of the future are indeed visible to us in the present, the challenge is to ensure that unintended traumas of lockdown do not manifest as socially harmful forms of violent behaviour in years to come.

As Zhang (2020) notes, however, more research is required on family violence during and after the pandemic, as well as on the structural conditions that engender violent activity in this period. This will enable researchers to construct a more detailed picture of what potentially lies ahead in the future. Meantime, policy responses need to include additional support and resources from both the state and non-governmental organisations to manage the consequences of child abuse (Zhang, 2020). There also needs to be a long-term support plan for victims (Every-Palmer, et al., 2020). Whilst this should include vital intervention mechanisms like counselling and therapy, the Covid-19 pandemic provides states with an opportunity to fundamentally restructure society along more progressive lines (Briggs, et al., 2020). Indeed, placing the social and economic needs of society's most vulnerable groups at the forefront of this would help to mitigate the *potential* long-term consequences of childhood trauma experienced during the lockdown.

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