

Briefing: Children & young people's mental health and Covid-19.

In advance of First Minister's Questions on 12/11/20 and question S5F-04565 'To ask the First Minister what the Scottish Government is doing to support children's mental health throughout the pandemic and subsequent restrictions' we wanted to share some insights on the impact of Covid-19 on children & young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Before the coronavirus pandemic there were several key issues facing children & young people's mental health in Scotland.

- While more data would be required to determine a trend, the suicide rate for young people aged 15-24 increased by 50% between 2017 and 2018, reaching the highest level since 2007. We are expecting further data regarding 2019 later this month.
- Data also shows that self-harm is increasing among young people over the last decade. The [Scottish Healthy Survey 2020 update](#) showed that self-harm was most prevalent among young people with 1 in 6 (16%) of 16-24-year-olds surveyed saying they had self-harmed at some point in their lives. Our recently published [report](#) examines young people's experiences of self-harm and help-seeking in Scotland.
- The ongoing and, as yet, unresolved issues around CAMHS referrals suggests that many young people in Scotland who are struggling to cope are not receiving the right support, at the right time.

Comprehensive data on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on population-wide mental health and the mental health and wellbeing of children & young people is still emerging. However, our helpline data and external research suggests young people may be particularly affected by the wider impact of the pandemic.

- Samaritans' [Covid-19 caller data](#) shows that more young people may be struggling as a result of coronavirus restrictions. Three key themes emerged from our conversations with young people who were struggling – a loss of coping mechanisms, loneliness & lack of peer contact, and negativity & uncertainty about the future.
- Worryingly, as lockdown progressed our listeners reported an increase in calls from young people who were suicidal, feeling trapped and other feelings that are known to be psychological risk factors of suicide.
- A study conducted by Glasgow University, in partnership with Samaritans and SAMH suggests that suicidal thoughts increased among younger people aged 18-29 during the first 6 weeks of lockdown, rising from 12.5%-14.4%. However, another [study](#) by the University of Manchester, analysing regional suicide data from England covering January to August 2020, has found no increase in suicide rates in post-lockdown months compared to pre-lockdown. A rise in suicide rates, among any age group, should not be viewed as inevitable and policy and services should continue to focus on prevention.

- [Childline](#) has reported an increase in the number of calls throughout the coronavirus pandemic from children & young people concerned with emotional and mental health issues including loneliness and low self-esteem.
- [Research](#) undertaken by SAMH shows that almost half of people with mental health conditions in Scotland felt they did not receive care or treatment due to the pandemic. This includes a nationwide reduction in referrals to CAMHS.
- It will be some time before we have a truly comprehensive picture of the long term impact of the coronavirus pandemic on children & young people's mental health, therefore, prevention must be an explicit priority of policy & services in Scotland.

How can policy & services support children and young people's mental health in light of Covid-19?

- Adopt a targeted and well-funded approach to ensure the right support services are available and accessible to children & young people as soon as they ask for help. In the current context, it's even more pressing that the aspirations of the Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing Programme Board - which include actions to improve access to CAMHS services, reduce waiting times and develop wider community-based support services for children, young people & their families - are realized as a matter of urgency.
- Promote emotional and mental health in education and youth settings, supporting children & young people to develop mental health literacy, identify positive coping mechanisms and encourage help-seeking.
- As our report [Hidden Too Long: uncovering self-harm in Scotland](#) recommends we need to collectively improve understanding of the complex wellbeing issues facing children & young people such as self-harm. This includes taking a holistic view of the sources of support children and young people may turn to including family, friends and online support, in addition to formal services such as education or healthcare. We are calling for a national strategy to improve understanding, reduce stigma and strengthen support for people affected by self-harm, including children & young people and their families.

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic Samaritans' listener volunteers have been taking calls from people struggling to cope 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Our helpline is available to anyone who needs to talk call for free on 116 123 or email jo@samaritans.org .

For more information on the insights included in this briefing contact our Policy & Communications Officer, Mairi Gordon m.gordon@samaritans.org.