

COVID-19: Consequences for the child welfare system in Catalonia

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Abstract

How has confinement by COVID-19 affected the welfare system for children and adolescents? The aim of this article is to reflect on the consequences of the global pandemic on the child welfare system, analysing the main consequences on children, adolescents and educational teams. The context of analysis focuses on the author's experiences in the child welfare system in Catalonia (Spain) during the pandemic, through his work as a social educator and researcher. The purpose of this article resides, therefore, in the reflection and subsequent proposals with the aim of redefining the system and improving the care of supervised children and adolescents.

Keywords

COVID-19, childhood, residential care, child welfare system

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Introduction

How has the lockdown affected residential centres for children and youths in Catalonia? Several months after the COVID-19 global pandemic began, and after measures were adopted by the governments of the affected countries, we can start to highlight many of the consequences that this pandemic has generated in certain populations. These ramifications have not only been felt by the public health care system but also within the economy, the labour-market, social relationships and even the emotional wellbeing of many. Some children and youths may have also suffered from the effects of the lockdown, especially in the physiological, psychosocial, academic, and emotional areas. In the case of children and youths in residential care, these consequences may have been elevated due to the various emotional and psychological problems that they often experience due to their pre-care and care experiences.

The global pandemic has also highlighted the existence of social inequalities. Moreover, those inequalities are further increased in the cases of foster children and youths due to the uncertainty of the general lockdown and the social policies and regulations determined by the administrations in charge of ensuring the rights of these children and youths.

Consequences of the lockdown on the child protection system in Catalonia

In Catalonia, the autonomic government (Generalitat) through the public body responsible for children and youths in foster care (DGAIA) executed similar actions to those decreed by the Spanish government at the national level. It is worth stressing that according to the most recent data available by DGAIA (April, 2020)¹ the administration had applied some sort of protective measure to

¹https://treballiaferssocials.gencat.cat/web/.content/03ambits_tematics/07infanciaiadolescencia/dades_sistema_proteccio/2020_04_informe_DGAIA.pdf

8,747 children and youth, of whom 5,218 of them were placed in residential care.²

The very first measure applied in these residential centres was the suppression of any kind of family permit. Each child or youth, according to the family records and the causes that drove to the loss of the parental authority, has a visitation permit established by the administration with their families (parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, etc.). Those permits vary in each case since they can last from one hour to full weekends. For that reason, many young people can live from Monday to Friday in the residential centre and spend the whole weekend with their biological family.

Considering the gravity and the fast-spreading nature of the pandemic at the beginning of March, the first measures adopted by the government - among them the suppression of the family permits already mentioned - made sense. However, some months after the initial wave of the pandemic in Spain, there are still a lot of weaknesses regarding the accommodation of some measures in order to guarantee not only the children and youth's wellbeing and protection but also the educational and professional teams that look after them.

At this point, I would like to focus on some of the challenges for the child protection system in Catalonia during the crisis of COVID-19:

The first element I would like to highlight is the personal protective equipment scarcity. It took time for the government to send personal protective equipment for both professionals and children in residential care. That means that there were many centres with 12, 20, 30 or even 40 children and youths whose social educators may have been exposed on the front line without any protective measure.

What's more, the labour situation has worsened substantially. As a result of COVID-19, hundreds of workers had to take a forced leave of absence from work as they suffered from chronic illnesses and had a higher risk of being infected.

² The rate of children to whom the administration has applied some type of measure per 1000 represents 6.2%

One of the immediate consequences is that the workload has increased dramatically for those who were working, doing double shifts and with no breaks at all during their workday.

Moreover, it is necessary to emphasise the suppression of family permits. After five months, children and youths living in protection centres have not seen their families. The administration did not take into account any adjustment to ensure this contact beyond the setting of video-calls through smartphones. Therefore, it is not difficult to imagine the consequences at psychological and emotional levels that this lockdown has generated in protected children and youth.

Another element to stress is all the cancelled activities aimed at children and youths in residential care. Among them, one which is of significant importance to manage the emotional consequences of being separated from the biological family has been the suppression of all psychosocial therapies. It is also important to mention the school setting since it has been seen as highly disorganised and also the disparity of criteria regarding the closure of the academic year. There have been teachers that demanded homework yet totally ignoring the reality of COVID-19 and others that could not adapt to the new circumstances with the result of children and youths losing all contact with their school mentors.

In addition, many of the residential centres accommodate hundreds of children and youths with functional diversity or pathologies that require specialised educational programmes. Their needs can be supported in the daily life of the protection centres but cannot be properly addressed from a psychosocial or academic perspective. All of this has helped to increment the invisibility of protected children and youths therefore generating a lack of specialised attention in other areas of the administration such as health care or education.

Towards a (necessary) review of the Catalan child protection system

Nevertheless, the hope, strength and love of the educational teams specialised in protecting children and youths has made it possible for them to adapt to this new situation and to new routines like many families did all over the world. All of

this for a reason: the emotional containment of the consequences that COVID-19 is generating in children and youths in residential care.

This global pandemic has brought about an opportunity to review the protection system and its capacity to respond to the needs of children and youths in the context of a health emergency.

Firstly, it is necessary to have greater interdepartmental co-ordination in order to assist more than 5,000 children and youths living in the residential centres managed by the Catalan protection system. It is also necessary to emphasize on the term 'interdepartmental', and on the importance of having co-ordinated policies and services amongst the different administrative departments by virtue of the child's best interest. It is paramount in order to meet the children and youths' developmental needs (physical, educational, emotional and psychosocial, among others).

Furthermore, it is also required to bring up to date the support measures from an academic perspective. The educational teams besides managing the children and youths emotional and psychosocial needs must also assist their academic needs. In the context of COVID-19, social educators from residential centres must assume more responsibility on educational matters in order to compensate the fact that children and youths are not attending school. It's important to mention that most of those children present several academic difficulties that requires an intensive intervention and adequate and ongoing supports (human and technical) to maintain their academic adherence. Therefore, the administration should provide such supports in order to cover their specific academic needs. If not, it could put those children in a situation of academic disadvantage compared to those that are not in care.

At a psychosocial level, it is imperative to encourage a therapeutic follow-up, for both workers and children from residential centres, and the need for tools to cope with emotions beyond what can be offered in the daily life of the centres. Likewise, the historical moment in which we are living requires an effort from the educational teams to respond in an adequate way to the needs of protected children.

Lastly, regarding their contact with their family, it is urgent as society begins to reopen, to restart the visitation permits in accordance to the present sanitary measures. Suppressing familiar permits might be seen as a secondary victimisation; in order to solve this situation, the administration should be updating the protection measures so as to benefit the interest and emotional wellbeing of children and youth in residential care.

Nonetheless, the system has to be reviewed, we need to support new protective measures for children and youths within the vast list and measures in the legal system, such as family placement or the contention in the biological families, providing them professional, social and educational resources to prevent separating children from their families.

In summary, COVID-19 has generated many consequences including a noticeable increase in inequality but it has also brought interesting lessons for the social educators and professionals that were on the front line; from my perspective, many have shown great dedication in order to ensure the wellbeing of children and youths. Most children have shown a capacity of adaptation to this new normality despite the difficulties and emotional consequences. However, the administration, in their role as corporate parents, should be more involved and co-ordinate actions with other public departments in order to put the child's best interest as a priority, and especially within the context of a worldwide crisis.

About the author

Dr Daniel Ortega is a social educator and associate professor. He holds a master's degree in criminology and legal-criminal sociology, a master's degree in social and educational Interventions, and a PhD in education and society from the University of Barcelona. Daniel is a member of the research group on children and adolescents at social risk (IARS) by the Autonomous University of Barcelona. He combines his professional work as an educator in the children's welfare system and the system of juvenile justice, with teaching and research at the Autonomous University of Barcelona.