

How did migrant-origin young people in Ireland fare during the COVID-19 pandemic?¹

Emer Smyth*, Merike Darmody, Dympna Devine

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions had a wide-ranging detrimental impact on children and young people across the world. While there is now a good deal of evidence highlighting the overall negative impact of the pandemic on child wellbeing, less is known about how migrant-origin children and young people fared during the pandemic-related lockdown. We might expect some differences in impact, given the concentration of adult migrants in certain employment sectors, lower levels of English language proficiency among some migrant groups and less insider knowledge of the Irish educational system, which could affect parental capacity to support remote learning.

DATA AND METHODS

In order to explore how migrant-origin young people² fared during the pandemic, the research draws on a large-scale nationally representative longitudinal study, Growing Up in Ireland (GUI), utilising data from Cohort '08. These children and their families were first surveyed at nine months and followed up at three, five and nine years of age. In order to capture the experiences during the pandemic, a short online survey was conducted in December 2020, when the cohort children were around 12 years of age. These data are representative of migrant-origin young people who were living in Ireland at nine months old, but do not include more recent immigrants. The data were reweighted to take account of non-response and attrition over time.

The main outcome of interest is self-reported wellbeing among young people, measured using the Mental Health Inventory – 5 (MHI-5), with higher scores representing more positive wellbeing. The analyses in this study mostly draw on the young person's own perspective and capture different aspects of the impact of the pandemic, including support for remote learning in the form of technology and

¹ This Bulletin summarises the findings from: Smyth, E., Darmody, M. and Devine, D. (2024), "The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the wellbeing of migrant young people in Ireland". Educational Review. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2024.2341037>

* Correspondence: Emer.Smyth@esri.ie

² In this study, a migrant-origin family is defined as where both parents were born outside Ireland or, in the case of lone-parent families, that parent was born outside Ireland.

help at home, disruption to peer networks, participation in sport and cultural activities, and feeling that parents were worried about the situation. However, some information (such as parental job loss) is derived from the primary caregiver survey, usually completed by mothers. A rich set of background factors is taken into account, based on responses at the previous wave when the young person was nine years of age. In order to explore whether any differences found predate the pandemic, we take account of level of socio-emotional difficulties at age nine, as reported by mothers.

RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The results show that migrant-origin young people had poorer wellbeing than their native peers, even taking account of other family background factors. This gap was relatively substantial, equivalent in size to the gap between young people from lone-parent and two-parent families. Some aspects of pandemic experience differed for migrant-origin youth: they were less likely to have someone at home who helped with schoolwork, saw their friends more than before the pandemic but took part in sports and cultural activities less than previously. They were more likely than their native-origin peers to say that their parents were always worried about the pandemic. The analyses investigated how much each of these factors helped explain the overall migrant-native gap in wellbeing. The wellbeing gap is no longer significant once educational experiences are accounted for; in other words, poorer wellbeing among migrant-origin youth was largely related to less support for schoolwork at home over the period of school closures. Reduced social activities and greater parental worry during the pandemic account for some of the remaining gap in wellbeing.

The findings show a worsening in wellbeing among those migrant young people who previously had low levels of socio-emotional difficulties, thus resulting in a newly vulnerable group. The research presented here highlights multiple factors that impacted on the wellbeing of migrant-origin youth, including having less support at home for remote learning, having poorer peer relations, reduced participation in sports and cultural activities, and poorer broader family wellbeing. Future waves of data collection will allow us to determine whether there is a longer-term impact of the pandemic on these young people's wellbeing.