Three waves of the COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 was first reported in the UK at the end of January 2020 and lockdown announced on 23 March 2020. Many of us have uttered the words ‘when this is over’, but what does that really mean? As the first-, second- and third-order impacts of the virus manifest over different time frames, this pandemic will not necessarily be ‘over’ until we are through the impact of the ‘third wave’ of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We are currently experiencing the effects of the first wave, where deaths and disability are directly linked to COVID-19. Alongside the atrocious death toll, an as yet untold number of people are living with the lasting aftermath of a severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 infection—for some, even mild COVID-19 can be debilitating.

Parental loss of income will impact on children’s diets, housing and educational opportunities. Possible resultant cuts to public funding could lead to youth centres being shuttered; libraries never reopening; and the end of council-funded arts programmes (if they existed earlier). Children would lose even more spaces to socialise safely, potentially having to settle for obesogenic spaces such as fried chicken shops.

For vulnerable children living in temporary accommodation, losing access to routine check-ins from health services, legal advice and immigration support could have consequences that mark them for life. Lockdown means an increased risk of child abuse and domestic violence, both adverse childhood experiences with demonstrated repercussions in later life. Changes in law aimed at accommodating social distancing have also weakened statutory protections for some children: it is as yet unclear when these changes will be refined or reversed.

Even beginning to trace the lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic can be overwhelming. Yet this is the meaning of a pandemic: the virus has got into everything. It’s in our funding decisions, our legal protections, our hearts our minds. The pandemic cannot be ‘over’ until it is reckoned within every sphere of our lives.

But we mustn’t lose sight of that crucial thing about the third wave—it’s still far out at sea. The future is not foregone. We can act now, to mitigate economic injury, to prioritise the return of libraries, youth and community centres. The third wave doesn’t have to crash on undefended shores.

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Research in context

Systematic review

The authors aimed to describe the complications arising from the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK. They found that the pandemic had significant impacts on health, health care, education, social conditions, finances, employment and the economy. They also identified the need for coordinated and connected services and support.

Interpretation

The authors concluded that the pandemic had significant and lasting consequences, particularly for those who were already at risk of disadvantages. They highlighted the importance of ongoing support and coordination to mitigate these effects.