C OVID-19 is having devastating consequences for society. Look at the impact on jobs, income, education, mental health, debilitating illness and, above all, the lives being lost.

As this edition of PSW went to press at least 35,000 people across the UK had died from coronavirus. As well as the health risks, the pandemic has brought to the fore at least three significant social issues: homelessness, domestic abuse and child abuse and neglect.

Contrary to many other areas of life at the moment, it appears that the situation for people who are otherwise homeless, and in particular rough sleeping, may actually have improved. Local authorities, working with voluntary organisations, and under government instructions, have managed the Herculean task of accommodating about 4,000 people who sleep rough. The situation in respect of domestic abuse, is, by contrast, extremely worrying, with Refuge, the UK’s largest domestic abuse charity, witnessing a 49 per cent increase in calls to its helpline.

There are also legitimate fears lockdown and pandemic measures generally may have led to more child abuse and neglect. Calls from adults to the NSPCC helpline and counselling sessions provided by Childline have risen markedly since the onset of the crisis. Some increase in child maltreatment as a result of the pandemic could have been predicted. A substantial proportion of such maltreatment is carried out by members of the family and under government instructions, have managed the Herculean task of accommodating about 4,000 people who sleep rough. A paradox may, then, be under less stress and may be better able to care for their children. Many children will, moreover, now be seeing more of their parents and this is something that younger children in particular will relish.

When schools ‘closed’ in the UK due to the pandemic, justifiable fears were raised over the effect this would have upon child safeguarding. But it also has to be recognised that schools can be unsafe places for children. Bowen and Helsham (2019) revealed that almost one-third of year 6 pupils (ten to 11-year olds) had been bullied in school in Wales in the previous two months. Bullying is more common among children on free school meals, and those who are disabled or have special educational needs.

There are, in addition, some initial reports of falls in knife crimes against young people and of other young people now being in a situation where they are more able and willing to resist being drawn into criminal exploitation.

A social work paradox

The closure of schools has rightly made us more aware and appreciative of the role that teaching staff play in child safeguarding. But it is another ‘paradox’ of the pandemic that the key agency in child protection – social work – has received far less recognition. Yet it is social workers who have the legal responsibility for visiting children at risk and their parents, work that involves assessing, supporting and monitoring children in need, and those on child protection plans or in state care, and more a regular and long-term basis. This marginalisation of social workers is especially ironic given that they are continuing to perform this role during the present crisis – and sometimes without personal protective equipment.

To add insult to injury, when any ‘experts’ have been called upon to discuss child protection in the pandemic, they are very often not from the social work profession but from organisations such as the NSPCC and The Office for the Children’s Commissioner, which have much less experience of frontline child protection work. A staggering – and depressing – illustration of the gulf that exists in understanding and appreciation of child protection social work was provided in comments made by England children’s commissioner Anne Longfield.

She said social workers “need to be knocking on doors” in response to heightened concerns over children’s welfare. The commissioner will, presumably, next be suggesting to GPs that they take their patients’ temperatures.

A government paradox

A further paradox of this pandemic is the UK government’s newfound concern over child protection and other social issues. For the past ten years, Conservative governments have implemented swingeing cuts in public spending. Funding for children and young people’s services in England dropped by £2.3 billion, and spending on much-needed early intervention declined by 46 per cent between 2010 and 2018.

Yet, and throughout all of this, the government has continued to pledge its support to the ‘HS2’ high speed rail link which some have estimated will cost over £100 billion. There is abundant evidence of cuts and rising need in respect of many other vulnerable groups, including victims of domestic abuse and people sleeping rough – the very same groups whose cause the government is now, supposedly, championing.

Many people have expressed a wish, in the midst of this pandemic, that some of the ‘gains’ they have realised personally can be retained when this crisis is over. This is in respect of, for instance, a better work-life balance, interacting more with family and friends, and a re-ordering of their priorities.

One would hope – although not with a great degree of confidence – that after the pandemic the government would also seek to retain some gains, and in particular would continue to treat child abuse and neglect, domestic abuse and rough sleeping, and other acute social issues, as the emergencies they are.

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