

The Impacts of Covid-19 on Children and Social Policy Responses

TESEV Briefs aim to share with the public different opinions and recommendations on issues that are under TESEV's working areas.



Dr. Başak Akkan
Boğaziçi University Social Policy Forum

Başak Akkan is a senior research fellow at the Social Policy Research Centre (Social Policy Forum), and a lecturer at the Graduate Program in Social Policy at Boğaziçi University. She holds a PhD in Interdisciplinary Social Science from Utrecht University, Netherlands. She has acted as a research partner/coordinator of several research projects funded by the TÜBİTAK (Scientific Research Council of Turkey) and the EU Framework Programme for Research/Horizon 2020. She has published in journals such as Social Politics, Child Indicators Research, Children and Youth Services, Journal of Gender Studies and Feminist Theory. Her research interests are in the theories of welfare state, justice, and intersectionality focusing on care policies, childhood, child well-being, and life course perspective on social policies.

Contemplating the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on different age groups, the health and social care needs of elderly persons have been prioritized in the social policy responses in various countries.¹ Children had received less attention in the early stages of the pandemic. The mortality rates among children have been almost non-existent and consequently, they have not constituted a risk group stricken by Covid-19. Yet, in Turkey, stay-at-home restrictions that prioritized the elderly and the young were introduced in order to prevent the spread of COVID-19. In the wake of the recording of the first case of Covid-19 on March 11,² curfew restrictions were imposed first for persons over age 65 and as of April 3, for young people under age 20 (lowered to under age 18 on May 20). Schools were shut down on March 16 and TV-based distance learning supported by online education channel-Education Informatics Network (EBA) was launched starting from March 23.

The economic and social impact of Covid-19 on the livelihood of families, long duration of quarantine and isolation, struggles in accessing distance education, and surge in domestic violence exposed that children are also a vulnerable group mostly affected by the pandemic. The pandemic undeniably had adverse effects on the wellbeing of all children regardless of their privileged (option to stay at home) or unprivileged positions (forced to work). However, in a country with high incidences of child poverty, Covid-19 could have a significant impact in aggravating the existing inequalities among children and in creating new forms of deprivation. Within this context, the impact of Covid-19 on children is analysed under four headings: The poverty aggravating effect of the pandemic; the manifestation of inequalities regarding the physical home environment and living conditions of children; the deepening of digital inequalities and access to education; and increased and unrecorded cases of domestic violence and child abuse amid the lockdowns.

Child Poverty

The effects of the Covid-19 on the material deprivation of families and consequently on child poverty around the world pose its devastating outcomes. According to Save the Children and UNICEF, the number of children living under poverty in low and middle-income countries may rise by 15%, estimated to reach 672 million as a result of the pandemic.³ The study estimates that the biggest increase may be witnessed in Europe and Central Asia by 44% and in Latin America and The Caribbean by 22%.⁴ The report also conceives that families in precarious work with uncertain incomes will strive to meet their basic needs as the pandemic will pave the way into permanent job losses and food poverty.

Among the OECD countries, Turkey has the third-highest child poverty rate (following South Africa and Costa Rica) at 25%.⁵ Prevailing high incidence of child poverty is expected to aggravate due to the economic consequences of the pandemic as more families likely to be excluded from the labour market. The field studies conducted by NGOs providing humanitarian aid reveal that families experiencing job losses have not been able to pay their rents and other bills and food access is in jeopardy. The study of *Derin Yoksulluk Ađı* in Istanbul reveals that it is not just limited to layoffs; the situation harms the livelihood strategies of families.⁶ Many factors define children's wellbeing such as material deprivation of families, inadequate nutrition, future anxieties, and psychological traumas. Hence, the pandemic is affecting the vulnerable groups to a larger extent. Roma children whose families work in irregular jobs are among the groups experiencing the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic most severely due to loss of household income.⁷ Another vulnerable group impacted by the pandemic is seasonal agricultural workers and their children. Child labour in agriculture is prone to increase in some provinces.⁸ It can be expected that children will enter the labour market to a greater extent in the near future.

According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), in Turkey, 45.5% of children are engaged in household duties and this rate reaches 51.3% for girls.

16.3% of boys and 28.3% of girls spend 8 or more hours per week doing housework.

In accordance with the observation that women's unpaid work has been escalated with the Covid-19, it can be expected that lockdown can produce similar effects for girls who share the care responsibilities with their mothers.

Among the OECD countries, Turkey has the third-highest child poverty rate (following South Africa and Costa Rica) at 25%.

...[with the effects of the pandemic] it can be expected that children will enter the labour market to a greater extent in the near future.

Inequalities regarding the Physical (Home) Environment and Living Conditions of Children

As the pandemic resulted in months of lockdowns for children, the inequalities concerning children's physical home environment, living conditions as well as household duties have become evident. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), in Turkey, 45.5% of children (ages 5-17) are engaged in household duties and this rate reaches 51.3% for girls.⁹ 43.5% of children are engaged in household chores like shopping, washing clothes/dishes, ironing, cooking, and cleaning, while 23.2%

provide care for younger siblings, and 5.4% look after an elderly, disabled or sick relative in the household. 37% of children spend 3 to 7 hours per week doing housework. 16.3% of boys and 28.3% of girls spend 8 or more hours per week doing housework.¹⁰ It is demonstrated by other research that the situation where girls share the care tasks with their mothers is more widespread among families of low socioeconomic status who have limited or no access to childcare services.¹¹ In accordance with the observation that women's unpaid work has been escalated with the Covid-19,¹² it can be expected that lockdown can produce similar effects for girls who share the care responsibilities with their mothers. Considering that preschools and day care centres were closed throughout this process, the caregiving tasks of girls may have increased and that this may have a negative impact on girls' access to distance education.

The physical home environment and living conditions of children like unhealthy conditions of homes, limited personal space due to crowded households has exposed the spatial inequalities when the lockdown measures were introduced. The studies demonstrate that inadequate physical conditions of the households have a negative effect on child well-being.¹³ 16% to 18% of children in Istanbul do not have their own beds and that this rate reaches 44.3% among the lowest socio-economic groups.¹⁴ Refugee families share their apartments with other families due to high rents,¹⁵ while crowded and unfavourable home conditions of Roma families have a negative effect on the study environment of children.¹⁶ It can be argued that children are not affected similarly by curfews; the wellbeing of the vulnerable groups of children is more deeply affected due to the poor living conditions.

Educational and digital inequalities

Difficulties that children experience in accessing education and digital inequalities have become a broadly debated topic since the educational institutions were closed due to Covid-19. Following the closure of the schools, the Ministry of National Education (MEB) has launched the distance learning education through online and state-run TV-based education channels like Education Information Network (EBA) and the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT). The distance learning infrastructure has been provided free of charge through 3GB of internet access available through all operators for EBA use; students were able to follow their courses through the internet or television channels depending on their resources and preferences.¹⁷ EBA's infrastructure, which has been established as part of the Movement of Enhancing Opportunities and Improving Technology (Fatih project) was updated in early 2020,¹⁸ allowing the MEB to launch the distance learning channels promptly which was made available to millions of students.¹⁹ However, in tackling digital inequalities, while the physical infrastructure

EBA's infrastructure, [...] was updated in early 2020, allowing the MEB to launch the distance learning channels promptly which was made available to millions of students.

However, in tackling digital inequalities, while the physical infrastructure of the projects has been prioritized, improving digital capabilities of students has been neglected.

of the projects has been prioritized, improving digital capabilities of students has been neglected.²⁰

The majority of the students are expected to follow their courses through EBA TV channel, yet this has been almost impossible for children from vulnerable groups (such as Roma and refugees).²¹ Access to education already contains inequalities concerning the socio-economic status of children, gender, language skills and immigration history.²² Educational inequalities have become more discernible and prevalent as digital

inequalities define the access process amid the pandemic. On one hand, the learning outcomes between private school students who have been provided online personalized education with live teaching, and state school students whose resources are offline channels without any personalized material have been widened. On the other hand, difficulties in accessing channels like EBA; the inadequacy of home environment for following a course; difficulties in following non-personalized courses through TV-based channel; and difficulties in the conception of the education material (especially for children whose native language is not Turkish, those who have special needs) are likely to deepen the inequalities regarding the educational gains.

The account of a classroom teacher working in a village of Tokat cited in Umay Aktaş's article²³ appeared on the Education Reform Initiative (ERG) blog is striking:

I am teaching first graders. They managed to achieve literacy but they are not fluent. Courses provided on EBA TV assume that the children have fully grasped reading and writing. The courses run too fast for my students. Then, there is also the fact that families live in crowded households in the villages. A child can only watch EBA TV if priority is given to their education.

Other studies also point to the difficulties children are having in following distance learning courses.²⁴

In countries like Turkey, the school holds great importance in children's lives as a place of socialization and freedom where children otherwise have limited spaces available to them.²⁵ One of the major effects of Covid-19 on the lives of children has been the loss of contact with the school. In this context, children have also lost their ties with the school as a means of socialization and this would likely have psychological and emotional effects on children from all parts of society.

Child neglect and abuse

One of the fundamental issues concerning the lockdowns has been the hindrance of access to child protection systems. The increased cases of domestic violence and the shortfall in reporting child abuse and neglect revealed the weaknesses of the child protection system in Turkey. Focusing on the data that show the change/drop in lawyer assignments for child abuse cases, the Istanbul and Izmir bar associations are drawing attention to the evidence that children who are being exposed to abuse are unheard.²⁶ The apparent drop in the abuse cases could be explained by the loss of the channels that could have disclosed child abuse. The closure of the schools also had a negative effect on children's access to complaint mechanisms.

Policy recommendations

Responding to the impact of Covid-19 on children requires social policies addressing multi-facet vulnerabilities as the normalization process unfolds.

- Combatting child poverty should be prioritized in Turkey, as elsewhere. Social assistance programs,

provided by the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services, Municipalities and NGOs are significant social policy tools for meeting the urgent needs of children in poor households. Nevertheless, maintaining a stable household income, providing social assistance to the families who suffer from job losses are necessary steps towards this end. Basic income grant²⁷ as a social policy tool in responding to the economic effects of the pandemic has been heavily debated and has been introduced in countries like Spain²⁸ to address job losses caused by the pandemic. Such policy tool may have positive results in eradicating child poverty as the basic needs of the children could be met in the household. As the basic income grant is a citizenship based social provision, it can be implemented without stigmatizing children and vulnerable groups who depend on assistance to live or who have lost family income. Another issue that has been articulated amid the pandemic is the vitalizing of social solidarity mechanisms among the “strangers”. The practice of paying for basic needs of a third person embodied in the *bill on the hanger*²⁹ program (the electricity, water, gas or other bills of a person in need is paid by another person through a website that brings together people without exposing their identities) which was inspired by the traditional practice of *bread on the hanger* is a good example of this.

- The pandemic has also demonstrated the importance of treatment of *school as an arena of social welfare* and the conception of education as a social policy tool in addressing social inequalities. Resolving the loss of education will become the priority of schools when they will reopen. At this point, it is imperative that vulnerable children (due to the special needs, language barriers, or other reasons) who had experienced difficulties in accessing education through distance learning should be prioritized; they should be closely monitored and the educational losses should be regained. However, it is also crucial that an inclusive education system that could respond to the socio-economic and other inequalities of children should be rethought by taking into account the inequalities that have deepened and become more apparent with the pandemic. Children may be supported through school based social programs such as free lunches³⁰ and breakfasts. Depending on the magnitude of job losses to come, more children may require food support accessed through school in the coming period. Schools can be imagined as *arenas of social welfare* as much as institutions of education. In close contact with social services, tracking cases of domestic violence and other mental issues of children that have come about due to the effects of the pandemic and providing support to parents and teachers are important in responding to the negative effects of the pandemic.
- Although Turkey has been party to the international treaties and has the legal framework for the child protection system³¹; the need for the integrative and prevention-focused child protection mechanisms has re-emerged with the pandemic.³² Families, school, health and social services must work in coordination in this process with a prevention focus.³³ The Izmir Bar Association has proposed a 24/7 hot line reserved for child neglect and abuse cases separate from the general hotline services like Alo 183”.³⁴ It is suggested that the children should be informed about such hotline that they could directly call.
- There has been extensive debate in different platforms on the effects of Covid-19 on children (particularly with respect to educational and digital inequalities) and substantive knowledge has been accumulated. Maintaining the debate, yet supporting it with scientific studies that analyse the effects of the pandemic from the perspective of children should be given a priority.

Notlar

- 1 <https://ltccovid.org/>
- 2 <https://www.haberturk.com/corona-virusu-turkiye-ye-geldi-mi-hangi-ilde-goruldu-11-mart-corona-virusu-son-dakika-2610013>
- 3 https://www.unicefturk.org/yazi/covid19_yoksulluk
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 <https://data.oecd.org/inequality/poverty-rate.htm>
- 6 <http://m.bianet.org/bianet/toplum/224758-derin-yoksulluk-agi-pandemide-yoksul-haneler-acliga-terk-edildi>
- 7 <https://www.thenational.ae/world/europe/turkey-s-roma-hit-harder-than-most-by-coronavirus-outbreak-1.1019875>
- 8 https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---europe/---ro-geneva/---ilo-ankara/documents/publication/wcms_743368.pdf
- 9 <http://www.tuik.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=33807>
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Akkan, B. (2019) 'Care as an Inequality-Creating Phenomenon: An Intersectional Analysis of the Care Practices of Young Female Carers in Istanbul'. *Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. (28)8: 895-905.
- 12 <http://www.keig.org/korona-salgininin-yarattigi-kriz-kadin-emegi-acisindan-ne-ifade-ediyor/>
- 13 Uyan-Semerci, P., S. Müderrisoğlu, A. Karatay, B. Ekim Akkan, Z. Kılıç, B. Oy ve Ş. Uran (2012) *Eşitsiz Bir Toplumda Çocukluk: Çocuğun "İyi Olma Hali"ni Anlamak. [Childhood in an Unequal Society: Understanding Child "Wellbeing"]* Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University Press.
- 14 https://iscweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Turkey_NationalReport_Final.pdf
- 15 <https://www.smallprojectsistanbul.org>
- 16 https://spf.boun.edu.tr/sites/spf.boun.edu.tr/files/1439798483_roman_kitap_tr.pdf
- 17 <https://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/turkiyede-koronavirusun-egitime-etkileri-i/#more-12515>
- 18 <http://www.meb.gov.tr/turkiye-egitim-sisteminin-yeni-slogani-egitimde-firsat-adaleti/haber/20281/tr>
- 19 You may follow the ERG blog for information about the functioning of distance learning: <https://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/turkiyede-koronavirusun-egitime-etkileri/>
- 20 <https://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/koronavirusun-egitime-etkileri-iv-dijital-ucurum-uzaktan-egitimi-nasil-etkiliyor/>
- 21 <https://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/koronavirusun-egitime-etkileri-iv-dijital-ucurum-uzaktan-egitimi-nasil-etkiliyor/>
- 22 Candaş, A., Ekim-Akkan, B., Günseli, S. ve Deniz, M. B. (2011) *Devlet ilköğretim okullarında ücretsiz öğle yemeği sağlamak mümkün mü? Farklı ülke modelleri ve Türkiye'ye yönelik öneriler. [Is it possible to provide free lunches at state primary schools? Different country models and proposals regarding Turkey]* Istanbul: Open Society Foundation.

- 23 <https://www.egitimreformugirisimi.org/turkiyede-koronavirusun-egitime-etkileri-iii-uzaktan-egitimin-ilk-iki-haftasi-nasil-gecti/>
- 24 <https://www.smallprojectsistanbul.org>
- 25 Akkan, B., Müderrisoğlu S., Uyan-Semerci, P., Erdoğan, E. (2019) 'How Do Children Contextualize Their Well-Being? Methodological Insights from a Neighborhood Based Qualitative Study in Istanbul' Child Indicators Research, Vol. 12(2): 443-460.
- 26 <https://www.istanbulbarosu.org.tr/HaberDetay.aspx?ID=15704&Desc=>; <https://www.izmirbarosu.org.tr/HaberDetay/2052/covid-19-pandemi-surecinde-cocuklarin-durumu-raporu>
- 27 <https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/basic-income-and-pandemic-preparedness/> ; <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/05/1063312> ; <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2020/05/20/guy-standing-on-how-lockdowns-make-the-case-for-a-basic-income>
- 28 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-52707551>
- 29 <https://askidafatura.ibb.gov.tr/maintenance-add-invoice>
- 30 Candaş, A., Ekim-Akkan, B., Günseli, S. ve Deniz, M. B. (2011) Devlet ilköğretim okullarında ücretsiz öğle yemeği sağlamak mümkün mü? Farklı ülke modelleri ve Türkiye'ye yönelik öneriler. [Is it possible to provide free lunches at state primary schools? Different country models and proposals regarding Turkey] Istanbul: Open Society Foundation.
- 31 <http://www.unicef.org.tr/files/bilgimerkezi/doc/14.%20EĞİTİCİ%20EL%20KİTABI.pdf>
- 32 <https://rm.coe.int/168046eb7c>
- 33 <https://tr.euronews.com/2020/03/27/koronaviruse-karsi-evde-kal-ev-ortami-cocuklar-icin-guvenilir-mi-istismar-riski-var-mi>
- 34 <https://www.izmirbarosu.org.tr/HaberDetay/2052/covid-19-pandemi-surecinde-cocuklarin-durumu-raporu>

How to Cite:

Akkan, Bařak. 2020. "The Impacts of Covid-19 on Children and Social Policy Responses" *TESEV Briefs* 2020/6 <https://www.tesev.org.tr/en/research/children-social-policy-responses-covid-19>



Copyright © August 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced by electronic or mechanical means (photocopies, downloading, archiving, etc.) without the permission of the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV).

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors', and may not correspond in part or in full to the views of TESEV as an institution.



TESEV would like to thank the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) for their support for this publication.