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Covid-19: emerging needs for unemployed and economically inactive individuals

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ABSTRACT

This Voices article presents emerging findings from research investigating the consequences of Covid-19 on individuals engaged on employability programmes in the United Kingdom. It outlines the challenges presented by 'lockdown' restrictions, as introduced to reduce the spread of Covid-19, on the delivery of employability programmes. Individuals engaged on such programmes experience a wealth of needs that have been compounded by Covid-19, resulting in new, emerging needs relating to personal wellbeing, social isolation, and confidence. Without effective and innovative support, individuals experiencing unemployment and economic inactivity will undoubtedly experience increased inequality; this inequality impacts on family, with individuals experiencing isolation from such, which in turn reduces wellbeing and stimuli, and indeed work, with Covid-19 compounding challenges in securing employment.



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Coronavirus (Covid-19), also known as SARS-CoV-2, has created a rapidly changing environment, with over 111 million confirmed cases and nearly 2.5 million deaths worldwide, in February 2021 (World Health Organisation, 2020), less than a year since being announced a pandemic. The rapidly changing nature of the Covid-19 situation has resulted in pressure on managing the spread, while limiting the associated health, societal, and economic consequences. The impact of Covid-19 on the mental health and wellbeing of individuals has, unsurprisingly, received increased attention (Pierce et al., 2020; Sibley et al., 2020); however, the impact of Covid-19 on individuals experiencing unemployment and economic inactivity has received less so. Unemployment has soared in many countries across the globe, with 'lockdown' restrictions in response to Covid-19 such as closing retail and hospitality. This article reflects on the challenges to organisations in supporting unemployed and economically inactive people to secure employment during the Covid-19 crisis. It reflects on evaluation data collected between July 2020 and February 2021, highlighting the changing needs of participants

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experiencing unemployment and economic inactivity and the challenges of balancing the people's needs pre-Covid-19 (unemployment and economic activity) with their new emerging needs (wellbeing and isolation from family).

Lockdown: family and work

'Lockdown' restrictions, introduced to reduce the spread of Covid-19, have resulted in the temporary closure of a large number of sectors (factories, retail, hospitality, etc.) and, on a personal basis, separation/isolation from family (ONS, 2020). Separation and isolation create significant challenges for family life, with increasing inequality and poverty (Power, 2020; Van Lancker & Nieuwenhuis, 2020), domestic violence (Sharma & Borah, 2020), and reduced labour force participation (Petts et al., 2021). These challenges can significantly affect economic stability, which is heightened as individuals experience unemployment and economic inactivity. In the United Kingdom, the job retention scheme (also known as 'furlough') and self-employment income support scheme were introduced to help reduce the burden of Covid-19 on employers and employees (ONS, 2020). In June 2020, 9.3 million people had applied for 'furlough' and 2.7 million people claimed self-employment income support; however, this did not prevent an increase in benefit claims (increasing from 1.24 million to 2.63 million) (ONS, 2020). Support schemes differ from country to country, with the US introducing the Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC) programme (U.S. Department of Labour, 2020) and Italy introducing the Support of Salary Payment ('*Cassa Integrazione Ordinaria*') (Norton Rose Fulbright, 2020).

Organisations offering programmes to tackle unemployment and economic activity have experienced challenges with programme delivery, with 'lockdown' restrictions having an impact on meeting participants, work experience placements, the delivery of training, and volunteer work. Reflecting on information from a wider evaluation, this article seeks to understand the changing needs of participants experiencing unemployment and economic inactivity. Through reviewing interviews with organisations (Table 1), this article outlines the challenges balancing the people's needs pre-Covid-19 (unemployment and economic activity) with their new emerging needs (wellbeing and isolation from family).

Table 1. Organisations offering support for unemployed and economically inactivate people.

Organisation A	Volunteering opportunities for individuals experiencing unemployment and economic inactivity.
Organisation B	Training on information technology, C.V. preparation and interview skills for individuals experiencing unemployment and economic inactivity.
Organisation C	Support in improving English for individuals experiencing unemployment and economic inactivity.
Organisation D	Support to individuals with autism to tackle unemployment and economic inactivity.
Organisation E	Support to deaf individuals to tackle unemployment and economic inactivity.
Organisation F	Support to young carers to tackle unemployment and economic inactivity.
Organisation G	Support to organisations in developing employability support for individuals experiencing unemployment and economic inactivity.
Organisation H	Support to individuals in first aid, warehousing, and workplace safety to tackle unemployment and economic inactivity.
Organisation I	Support to tackle unemployment and economically inactivity in individuals with previous involvement in criminal activity.

Emerging needs and expanding support

People accessing support for unemployment and economic inactivity experience a wealth of challenges, but ‘lockdown’ restrictions have compounded these challenges and created an environment fuelled by social isolation, reducing confidence and wellbeing (Sibley et al., 2020). This isolation impacts on family and work, with organisations noting the impact of isolation on their participants wellbeing and confidence:

I think it’s [talking about online meetings] had an impact on their wellbeing, their confidence, everything. [...] The needs have changed because it’s more emotional support that they require and to combat isolation. Because of the Covid-19 situation, people have been stuck at home. The women, normally we see them face to face so they miss that social contact which can lead to low mood, lack of motivation, things like that. (Organisation C)

Social isolation can increase loneliness that in the long term can negatively affect individual wellbeing, both mental and physical (Banerjee & Rai, 2020). These challenges were heightened for single parent families and individuals with caring responsibilities. According to organisations delivering support for unemployment and economic inactivity, the wellbeing of the participants was negatively affected due to increased isolation from family and community, challenges in accessing services/facilities, obtaining medication, finding employment, and financial issues (see Blustein et al., 2020; Zacher & Rudolph, 2020).

I think wellbeing has been a huge issue really. I think there’s a lot of people that aren’t used to being indoors for long periods, so there’s lots of problems for them in regard to loneliness, isolation, feeling that people are not there. [...] I think they find that really, really hard. That puts additional stresses on – perhaps not having somebody come around and see you or whatever is quite difficult. One of my people said to me, and he does actually have criminal record, but he said to me it felt like being inside. So, I think some of them have just found it really quite tough. (Organisation E)

Organisations acknowledge the changing and diverse needs of participants on the programme, creating pressure on these organisations to deliver innovative support that tackles unemployment and economic inactivity in conjunction with offering wellbeing, social, and economic support.

Organisations delivering support are under pressure to address these new and emerging needs within the context of their existing services. The challenge of expanding support is wide-ranging, with organisations discussing challenges associated with accessing technology (especially for people with complex needs). and administrative requirements:

Yes, so not being able to physically meet participants, getting them to sign paperwork and physically not being able to help them online with job searching. Because doing that remotely is slightly harder especially, again, they haven’t got the digital equipment. (Organisation A)

I’m still supporting all my clients, I’m in regular contact with them. It’s just a different way of working, we’ve just had to adapt to using different technologies. Obviously, they are not able to come to our Centre, so we’ve been offering more online classes. [...]. (Organisation C)

The challenge of balancing the pre-Covid-19 needs associated with unemployment and economic inactivity with the post-Covid-19 needs associated with wellbeing, social isolation, and confidence illustrates the need for innovative solutions.

Conclusion

Coronavirus (Covid-19), also known as SARS-CoV-2, is a virus that has been spreading worldwide, affecting individuals' lungs and airways (with other short- and long-term effects under investigation). Action taken to limit the spread of Covid-19 has had an impact on the isolation and wellbeing of individuals globally (Blustein et al., 2020; Pierce et al., 2020; Zacher & Rudolph, 2020). Individuals experience negative consequences, with social distancing measures affecting their relationships with family and engagement in employability programmes, leading to sedentary behaviours. For people experiencing unemployment and economic inactivity, Covid-19 has had a significant impact on work and family. It compounds and expands the challenges they experience and, without effective and innovative support, will undoubtedly increase inequality.

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Notes on contributor

Claire Paterson-Young is a Senior Researcher at the Institute for Social Innovation and Impact (ISII). Claire's research examined how social impact measurement as a form of organisational performance management can enhance outcomes for children in custody. A key feature of her research is the development of social impact measurement frameworks that aid organisations to identify the intended and unintended impact of interventions.

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