



Impact of Covid-19 on the Wellbeing of School Going Children in Kibra Slum, Nairobi, Kenya

Authors

- 1 Felix Kiruthu- Kenyatta University [_kiruthu.felix@ku.ac.ke](mailto:kiruthu.felix@ku.ac.ke)
2. Hillary Omala –Carolina for Kibera: Hillary@carolinaforkibera.org
3. Wilson Muna Kenyatta University: muna.wilson@ku.ac.ke
4. Ann Kungu Carolina for Kibera _ann@carolinaforkibera.org
5. Abba Babamaragana - Kenyatta University babamaragana@gmail.com

Accepted February 2021

Published November 2021

How to Cite:

Kiruthu, F., Omala, H., Muna, W., Kungu, A., & Babamaragana, A. (2021). Impact of Covid-19 on the Wellbeing of School Going Children in Kibra Slum, Nairobi, Kenya. *Msingi Journal*, 5(2), 40-48. <https://doi.org/10.33886/mj.v5i2.239>

Abstract

The scourge of Covid-19 has led to loss of livelihoods and disruption of social life and economic activities globally. Government containment measures, like travel restrictions and lockdowns have adversely affected urban communities, particularly those living in slum areas. The study examined how the pandemic has impacted on the wellbeing of school going children in Kibra, the largest informal settlement in East Africa. It interrogated how the closure of schools has disrupted their normal life, including learning, diet, care and protection by caregivers. The effect of the pandemic on parents was also interrogated for the same purpose. The research collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Semi-structured questionnaire was administered among 52 parents and 132 school going children randomly selected from both primary and secondary schools. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze quantitative data while thematic analysis was employed to analyse qualitative data. Results from the study showed that school closure due to restrictions imposed following the threat of COVID-19 revealed unprecedented threats and vulnerabilities among children, including physical and emotional abuse, sexual harassment, neglect, and lack of proper diet, attributed to lack of income among parents. The study recommends increased government action in designing intervention policy measures to remedy the situation.

Covid; hand washing; informal settlement; social distancing; wellbeing;

Introduction

It is evident that fewer children are been infected by the novel corona virus, yet majority have

adversely been affected. Notably, the effect of COVID-19 on school going children is significantly lower in high income countries, nevertheless it is critical to note that the situation is likely to get worse in low- and middle- income countries (Simba, et. al., 2020). In this case study, we assess direct and indirect implications of the pandemic on the well-being of school-going children. Globally, the scourge of Covid-19 has led to loss of livelihoods and disruption of social life and economic activities. Government containment measures such as travel restrictions and lockdowns have adversely affected urban communities, particularly those living in informal settlements. The study examines how the pandemic has impacted on the wellbeing of primary school going children in Kibra, the largest informal settlement in East Africa. The objectives of the study were to: establish the effect of school closure on the safety; investigate the effect of caregivers' loss of income; and to interrogate the effect of school closure on learning among school going children in Kibra.

The research adopted a mixed method design in order to probe into the effects of Covid pandemic on the wellbeing of school going children in Kibra Sub-County, within Nairobi City County Metropolitan. The target population included 52 parents and 132 children in primary and secondary schools in the area. These schools included both government-run and private schools. The researchers targeted children in these schools ranging from Class 4 to 8 for primary schools and Form 1 to Form 3 for secondary schools. The aim was to interview children who had ability to understand the prevailing situation arising from Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences on their wellbeing. In general, the specific age of these children ranged from the age of 9 years to 19 years. Quantitative and qualitative data from parents, school children, non-governmental organizations was collected and analysed. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory was used to analyse how the experiences of children, parents/caregivers and their environments have interacted in Kibra, to influence their well-being at the height of Covid-19 pandemic. This analysis was useful in the understanding the dynamic interactions among diverse factors in Kibra that inevitably impact on the wellbeing of school going children.

The Kibra informal settlement is one of the largest in East and central Africa with an estimated population of 185,777 people, occupying an area approximately 2.5 square kilometers (Kenya population and housing census, 2019). The settlement is located 5 kilometers from Nairobi Central Business District and consists of 13 villages with diverse population densities.

The history of Kibra is traced back to 1904 when the British enlisted the Nubian soldiers into the Kings African Rifles, with a view to defeating the Africans in Kenya who were resisting against British colonial rule (Ekdale, 2014). After the British gained control over the country, the Nubian soldiers were allocated land to settle. It is notable that at this time the colonial policy of colour bar dictated that different racial groups were allocated separate zones for settlements, to ensure that other communities did not trespass on the European exclusive settlement zone. This was done ostensibly to stop the spread of infectious diseases to the European community (Murunga, 2012). The segregation and zoning was articulated in the major colonial Nairobi city plans of 1905, 1927 and 1948 (Mwaniki, et al, 2015). Since the Nubians could not be associated with the other African groups, they were allowed to settle in Kibra.

Over the years, other African groups settled in Kibra, especially after the 1950s during the Mau

Mau war, when communities from Western Kenya especially the Luo and the Abaluhya groups, among others, infiltrated the area. At independence, the government lifted controls over movement and settlement into the urban centres. This subsequently led to a high influx of unemployed youth into Kibra and other informal settlements thereby exacerbating the already serious overcrowding situation. This coupled with the rapid growth as well as challenges of unequal distribution of infrastructure as propagated by the colonial plans and other sectoral pressures, soon became a huge challenge for the independent government (Mwaniki, et al, 2015).

Given the above analysis, it is imperative to note that the government was unable to cope with the huge demand for low income housing as well as transport, water, electricity infrastructure in informal settlements such as Kibra. In Kibra therefore, very few areas are connected with piped water from the Nairobi Water and sewerage Company (NWSC). Most of the water supply requirements is handled by private water vendors from kiosks. Some of these kiosks are operated by community based organizations (CBO's) (Engleson, 2011). Similarly, access to toilets is another challenge in Kibra and other informal settlements. This could be explained by the fact that Nairobi's informal sector is characterized by large scale landlordism, implying that very many houses are owned by a small number of landlords whose main motive is to maximize on rental profits by constructing numerous houses that are poorly constructed (Dafe, 2009).

It was against this background that when the first cases of Covid-19 were confirmed in Nairobi in March 2020, that Kibra community found itself. Subsequently, the government issued COVID-19 restriction measures that led to the closure of all learning institutions from March 2020 to January 2021, when most of the schools were allowed to resume. Other measures included compulsory wearing of masks, restriction of movements, and a curfew from 7pm to 4am in the morning. In addition, several counties were locked down in order to stop the spread of the pandemic from the disease infested counties of Nairobi, Mombasa, Kwale and Kilifi. These measures adversely impacted communities in informal settlements like Kibra, where majority of residents are very poor, with unreliable means of earning a livelihood. Basic necessities such as food, fuel, water and rent absorb the majority of households' monthly incomes with some households barely meeting all the costs and those that do leaving nothing to save. Low-income results in children receiving a diet that is often deficient in energy, protein, and micronutrients. With the informal sector sites closing down each passing day resulting in soaring unemployment, majority of households are facing hunger and inability to purchase basic commodities including masks and other sanitary items and the level of exposure is even higher since people have literally nowhere to go every day. The current study investigated the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the wellbeing of school going children in the area. This study also examined the general attitude of both pupils and their parents towards COVID-19 infection prevention. Specifically, their attitude to face mask, handwashing and social-distancing is interrogated.

Although 80% of the pupils claimed to have had protective face mask, at least 20% of them do not have any face mask (and are consequently at risk of infection and spreading it). Although the number is high among the pupils, it is worse among their parents as 35% of parents were found not have any face mask. This is worrisome as a parent with no face mask has neither the conviction nor interest to demand that their children wear it.

While a third of the pupils reported that they wear face masks often, more than 40% actually only wear it sometimes. Their attitude to handwashing is consistent to their attitude towards wearing face masks, even if slightly worse. A third of them said they wash their hands often; more than 45% only wash sometimes, and 5% rarely wash their hands. When their response to observing social-distancing protocol is factored in, the reality is grimmer: 36% observe social distancing only sometimes, while more than 24% of them rarely keep any distance. These observations can be explained by the findings of (Engleson, 2011), who noted the difficulty of accessing water in Kibra informal settlement.

It is helpful to look at the adherence of these measures by the pupils along with how their parents adhere to them themselves. The result on face masks revealed that the parents did not (and do not) conduct themselves any better than how their children are operating: a third usually wear mask, a third often wear mask and a third wear mask only sometimes. The parents' attitude to handwashing and social distancing is a mirror reflection of their children's: 37% and 40% do them often and 23% and 34% do them only sometimes. The implication, therefore, is that the children are not under any particular pressure to strictly adhere with face mask, handwashing and social-distancing requirements of the government because their own parents practice them.

Indeed looking at their environment, the pupils attitude is commendable: 10% of them operate in schools with no handwashing station (although, the lucky person operate in school with both water and soap). However, the revelation of the pupils vis-à-vis COVID-19 measures at their own homes is astonishing: half of them are from homes with no handwashing stations (although the other half reported that their handwashing stations are equipped with both water and soap). This suggests that schools and homes with handwashing stations also make efforts to furnish them with soap and water. Unsurprisingly, only 5% of the pupils have ever been tested for COVID-19. But surprisingly, two-third of their parents have never also been tested, and 79% of the parents reported to have never been vaccinated for COVID-19. These findings concur with (ANPPCAN, 2021), which observed the difficulties of accessing water by most Kenyan families in the counties selected in the case study, including Kajiado, Isiolo and Nairobi.

The study findings indicate that, not all the effects of the school closure are negative. Parents have, for example, found unprecedented amount of time spent with their children, albeit with opportunity cost implication (time spent with parents is mostly time spent not learning). The pupils reported that prior to COVID-19 pandemic; they spent very limited time (53% 0-2 hours; 43% 3-4 hours) to freely indulge themselves in play etc. The idling time necessitated by the school closure, however, meant that significant time (28% 5-6 hours, 16% 7-8 hours, and 7% more than 8 hours) is wasted by them. This is especially so if consideration is paid to how they used to spend their time initially. Half of the students reported spending less than two hours with their parents prior to COVID outbreak. Similarly, close to the other half (43.7%) spent just over three hours with parents. During the COVID-imposed school closure, however, massive change is noticeable in the time they spend with their parents: 25% spend 5-6 hours, 21% spend 7-8 hours and 10% spend more than 8 hours with their parents everyday (the last category would have spent more than 60 hours with parents, now, compared to around 20, before). Unsurprisingly, therefore, More than a third of the pupils

did not like spending that much time with the parents.

The responses of the parents are not remarkably different from those of the pupils. Two-third (35% 01-2 hours; 27% 3-4 hours) used to spend very limited time with their children when they were attending school. Conversely, the school closure has forced a swift change: a quarter of parents spend around 7 hours with their children and more than a quarter spend more than 8 hours with the children. Just like the pupils, the parents have nothing positive to say about the abundance of the time they reluctantly spent with their children. A number of parents cited the increased burden in feeding and increased risk of risky behavior for the children due to increased time at home from school closure.

The possible link between rise in rate of bullying and closure of school following the covid-19 pandemic in Kenya is explored in this section. As Smith (2021) has observed, the long period of school closures due to Covid -19 pandemic, is one of the factors that have distinguished it from that of pandemics in terms of its effect on the wellbeing of school going children. Both the parents and children who were interviewed in Kibra, pointed out that one of the effects of school closure was increased incidence of bullying of children. There is an alarming degree of bullying reported by the pupils' consequent to the closure of schools: 15% of the pupils reported that they were personally bullied and more than 80% of them revealed that they know other students who were victims of bullying. There is however a caveat here; it could be that they children are more comfortable disclosing bullying cases involving others than the ones they personally suffered. Hence, there is need to cross examine this with responses of parents. However, a similar percentage of parents (15) reported that their own children have been bullied, and around 20% of parents know other children other than theirs who have been bullied.

For the perpetrators of the bullying, the pupils pointed at friends as the main violators. The parents seem to agree: almost 90% of the cases were by friends, albeit siblings and neighbors also handed out bullying. The pressure and stress accompanying the outbreak of the pandemic was definitely one of the causes of bullying of school children especially within the family. This included heavy demands on the parents to provide food and other family requirements, at a time when many of them had already lost their means of income. In addition, given that children for a long time during the school closure, this left many parents fatigued. Similar incidents of bullying of children were reported in Liberia and Sierra Leone during the school closures following the Ebola pandemic (DFID, 2020). In addition, it is notable that when children are left on their own to play for long hours in the absence of adult supervision, the incidence of bullying is likely to increase. This is particularly likely in the urban informal settlements like Kibra, where even the spaces where children can play safely are almost nonexistent. As Dafe (2009) has observed, in Kibra houses are heavily congested by the few landlords whose motive is to maximize on profits on every space available. This results in a lot of pressure among the scores of children competing to use the same spaces for playing with friends

Impressively, these incidents of bullying are not condoned: almost all the time the cases have been reported to teachers (56.25%) and parents (18.75%) who have duly helped out the victims most (>70%) of the time. Nevertheless, it is possible that a good number of such children were not able

to report incidents of bullying within the family due to fear of the consequences or intimidation. Such children are likely to require psycho- socio support during the post covid era. It is important to note that some of the school going children reported to have disappeared from home during the long period of school closure, are quoted as indicating that they run away from home as they were unhappy with the way they were treated at home. A similar report is corroborated by Joining Forces coalition Report on Uganda (May, 2020), which observed the increase in the incidence of child bullying especially by parents. The report noted that the uncertainty accompanying covid-19 outbreak, hand in hand with prolonged periods of confinement of families in small homes, created a very stressful environment. Consequently, 80 per cent of parents in northern Uganda were reported to have used violence against the children especially in an effort to restrain them from straying too far away from home. This bullying was mainly characterized by spanking and slapping. Moreover, children witnessed more quarrels and fighting between the parents and this had adverse psycho- socio effects on the affected children.

Cases of sexual harassment are lower compared to conventional bullying. Only 6% of the pupils reported any knowledge of such cases. But the cases widen up if responses of parents are factored in: 12% of parents are privy to incidents of sexual harassment. In April 2021, barely a year since the start of the pandemic, the Ministry of Public Service, Youth and Gender Affairs Cabinet Secretary Margaret Kobia reported a 36% spike in Gender based violence cases in 2020 compared to cases reported in 2019.

The few cases noted by the pupils were carried out by neighbors (37.5%), friends (37.5%) and relatives (12.5%). The parents reported friend being the harasser. A report for Al Jazeera by Andrea Dijkstra on 18th September 2020, narrated how a young girl was forced to have sex with a boy in Marsabit in the northern part of Kenya. Desperate for food which her parents were unable to provide, the boy offered her food in exchange for sex. These cases involved victims aged below the age of ten (12.5%) and preteens (75%) according to the pupils' responses. The parents' responses seem to agree: 50% of victims are aged below ten and the other 50% are in early teen. As we have already seen, these findings corroborate with AlJazeera News findings in regard to bullying of children during the Covid pandemic in Kenya in 2020 (Andrea Dijkstra on 18th September 2020). These incidents are being reported by the pupils about percent of the time (to mainly parents and teachers) who provide help, but not all the time. The parents decried that they are being informed only about fifty percent of the time, with friends and neighbors been the preferred confidants sometimes. During the pandemic, media reports in Kenya indicated that many teenage girls were lured away from their homes in order to attend parties, either by their own friends or by older men. It is obvious that most of these girls were inevitably sexually molested by those who accommodated them sometimes for several weeks. A report by Joining Forces Coalition on Uganda dated May 2020, indicated that school closures have led to the rise in child marriage incidence. Adolescent girls are particularly more vulnerable, with 25 new child marriage cases reported in one week alone (Joining Forces Coalition, May 2020) These sexual harassment cases result in both immediate and long term harms on the victims. For example, the pupils revealed that about 20% of their colleagues became pregnant despite the tender age at which they suffered the abuse. The parents agreed with the views of the pupils, and add that the perpetrators of the sexual harassments in their community are mainly boda-boda riders (50%) and neighbors.

Another repercussion of the sexual harassment is that the [now] pregnant victims only return to school about 40% of the time (according to pupils) or (60%, according to parents). This means that at least half of the pregnant minors do not return to school. Furthermore, half of them are forced to marry and a third of them are chased out of their homes by parents/caregivers. This data compares well with a UNDP on Sierra Leone (2015), which observes that 40% of the school-going children became pregnant in 2015, following the lockdowns arising from the Ebola pandemic in West Africa.

This study also interrogated the responses of both pupils and parents on changes in the feeding patterns of the pupils/students consequent to COVID-19 and the resultant policy measures to contain it.

Out of the 135 pupils/students, 117 (86.67%) revealed that they used to have breakfast prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. Similarly, a total of 126 (93.33%), 120 (88.89%) and 43 (31.85%) reported to have been having lunch, dinner and snacks, respectively. There is no significant disruption in their feeding during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because 112 (82.96%), 92 (68.15%), 118 (87.41%) and 32 (23.7%) pupils/students still get breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks, respectively. Thus, the only noticeable change is in the lunch they are being served.

However, the pandemic has caused huge (63.5%) disruption to how parents normally cook their meal. Moreover, over 70% of them have had to reduce the number of meals to feed their children. School feeding programs have over the years been viewed as contributors to improved learning outcomes; education and improved nutrition; school health. In 2002 the United States General Accounting Office (USGAO) published a report that claimed “school feeding programs may not be cost effective when compared with alternative interventions such as providing quality teaching and offering nutritional and health packages directed at pregnant women and at mothers with their preschool children” (USGAO 2002, p. 3). Alderman and Bundy (2011) raised the question of the effectiveness of school feeding programmes through the *School Feeding Programs and Development: Are We Framing the Question Correctly* research paper that proved that school feeding programmes are not a solution for challenges in education but they are a critical complement to other solutions.

There is therefore a noticeable discrepancy between what the pupils are getting and what the parents are providing. This suggests that organizations have stepped up to fill the gap, because 22 (16.3%) pupils/students have lamented that the food they eat at home during the school closure is not sufficient. This therefore reaffirms the challenges around feeding that exist in disadvantaged communities. Around 70% of parents have either completely lost their jobs or have had significant income reduction. Almost half of them have reported being supported by organizations to help cushion their hardship. This intervention has proven crucial to bridging the gap between the meals they can provide and what their children needed.

The effect of COVID-19 imposed school closure on the learning of the pupils is reported in this part of the paper. School closure was to serve as a solution to social distancing but did the prolonged

closure have any effects on the wellness of school going children? Although significant number of them (91.9%) continued learning even when schools closed, the pupils reported challenges that hampered their learning. First, most of those who continued learning were not getting enough learning hours (3-4: 50%, 0-2: 33%). Second, some of them reported that their parents could not afford the learning materials that are required to aid their study. And, third, the learning material are thus not accessible to some of them as of when needed. Unsurprisingly, therefore, a third of the pupils said they did not enjoy learning at home. According to the Kenya Covid-19 gender assessment of 2020, slightly more girls (32%) than boys (30%) did not continue with learning from home, and more so in rural areas. The disparities will need to be assessed further in the informal settlement setting where girls and boys are the most disadvantaged across all the economic blocs as they were not learning from home.

With around 70% of the parents having lost their jobs, and by implication income, more than 90% of the parents lamented that they could not afford the learning materials their kids desperately needed for learning. This resulted in massive reduction in hours the children spend studying: more than 40% of parents conceded that their children learned less than two hours a day, and more than 50% reported that their children learned between 3-4 hours. However, around a third of parents confessed that their children discontinued learning throughout the period of school closure. All told, more than half of the parents did not like the entire period of home-learning for their children. Tellingly, two-third of the parents revealed that the pandemic has caused them mental stress. This unwanted condition might partly be attributable to their inability to meet the needs of their children during the critical time of need.

Conclusion

The scourge of COVID-19 has resulted in severe disruption of learning among school-going children in poor communities, particularly in the context of informal settlements in urban areas. The wellbeing of children in Kibra was noted to have been significantly affected, with forced restrictions and school closures exposing them to physical and emotional abuse within a hostile home environment. Many were reported to suffer sexual harassment, leading to unwanted pregnancies and diseases. The unfortunate loss of income by their parents and caregivers exacerbated the already complex and difficult situation, increasing the burden of providing food for them, with many feeding programs at school inaccessible. The extended period of school closure also exposed children to risky behaviours, bullying, and neglect. The study recommends increased government action in designing intervention policy measures to remedy the situation.

References:

Andrea Dijkstra: Al Jazeera News, 18th September 2020

ANPPCAN: Impact of COVID-19 on Children in Busia, Loitoktok, Marsabit and Nairobi – Kenya, 2021.

Dafe Florian: No Business like Slum Business? The Political Economy of the Continued Existence of the Slums: A Case Study of Nairobi, Working Paper Series, London school of Economics, 2009 No.09-98

- Ekdale Brian: "I Wish They Knew that We Are Doing This for Them", Journalism Practice, ,
Journal of Eastern African Studies, 8:2, 181-196,2014
- Fontanesi, L., Marchetti, D., Mazza, C., Di Giandomenico, S., Roma, P., & Verrocchio, M. C. (2020). The effect of the COVID-19 lockdown on parents: A call to adopt urgent measures. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 12(S1), S79.
- Harold Alderman, Donald Bundy, School Feeding Programs and Development: Are We Framing the Question Correctly? *The World Bank Research Observer*, Volume 27, Issue 2, August 2012,
- GoK : Kenya Population and Housing Census: Volume I, 2019
- Joining Forces Coalition: Keeping Children safe: in Uganda's Covid-19 Response, May 2020
- Murunga Godwin The cosmopolitan tradition and fissures in segregationist town planning in Nairobi, 1915–23, *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 6:3, 463-486.
- Mwaniki, Dennis., et al: Urbanisation, Informality and Housing Challenge in Nairobi: A Case of Urban Governance Failure? Paper presented at the RC21 International Conference at Urbino (Italy) 27-29 August 2015
- Simba, J., Sinha, I., Mburugu, P., Agweyu, A., Emadau, C., Akech, S., ... & English, M. (2020). Is the effect of COVID-19 on children underestimated in low-and middle-income countries?. *Acta Paediatrica (Oslo, Norway: 1992)*.
- Social Science in Humanitarian Action Platform; Key considerations: COVID-19 in informal urban settlements (March 2020)
- United Nations Development Programme: Assessing Sexual and Gender Based Violence during the Ebola Crisis in Sierra Leone, October 2015
- United Nations Development Programme: Assessing Sexual and Gender Based Violence during the Ebola Crisis in Sierra Leone, October 2015
- 2020 Covid-19 Gender assessment Kenya; Gender perspective
- .