



REPORT ON THE SITUATION OF RESIDENTIAL CHILD CARE IN SPAIN: THE RESPONSES OF CHILDREN'S HOMES TO COVID-19

Data collection for presentation at the 64th Annual Conference ACRC (Association of Children Residential Centers), San Diego, USA, April 2020.

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This report is limited in scope since it has been done through a quick consultation of some agencies and administrations that manage or have responsibilities in residential child care. It was about having an initial vision that would allow us to get an idea of how this time of confinement is being lived in the children's homes, but without the scientific nature that a careful study of representativeness between the different territories, agencies and types of residential care would have required.

The data was collected in the first weeks of April to be presented in a short video (<https://vimeo.com/404595099>) at the ACRC Annual Conference in USA. From that video link you can access presentations on the experience in residential child care facing COVID19 in other countries.

We understand that, despite its representativeness limitations, the results obtained may be of interest to those involved or interested in these programs.

This document avoids mentioning the information by territory or entity since it has not been systematically collected and it is not a comparative analysis.

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POSITIVE CASES FOR COVID-19 IN CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The first fact of interest is that very few administrations or agencies consulted knew cases identified as positive among the children and adolescents in residential care, with suspicious situations being somewhat more frequent, which finally resulted negative. Since it is known that these ages can pass the infection while remaining asymptomatic, this does not mean that there are no cases of infection, but that they have not been identified because they do not show symptoms. This situation has made it possible to avoid feared and very complicated scenarios in the case of symptomatic cases that require isolation within homes, since, especially in small homes, it could be very difficult. However, it has been necessary to carry out insulation due to leaks from the home, since, upon returning to it, for prevention, this separation was considered necessary.

POSITIVE CASES FOR COVID-19 IN SOCIAL EDUCATORS AND STAFF

Likewise, there were very few territories that reported cases of educators or staff identified as positive. However, there were numerous educators needing quarantine due to they had been living with or in proximity to people or relatives who had been infected. These preventive quarantines had caused a high number of leaves among the personnel, although in principle brief in time. These leaves caused agencies and administrations to quickly create pools of professionals prepared to carry out substitutions, including in some territory students attending the last course of the university's social education degree in order to have more candidates.

PHYSICAL SPACE

Logically, the situation experienced in confinement in children's homes varies considerably depending on the type of physical structure they present. Those of larger size and that have indoor playgrounds have a great advantage, even in the event that they had to isolate some children or young people with COVID-19 symptoms. A case is reported in which the neighbors who have seen the children playing in patios (of the

own home) have notified the police believing that they could not use them during the confinement.

In some administrations and agencies, they had released a home to have it empty and ready in case of need of isolation. In the Community of Madrid, a new home was opened for this purpose to receive cases that had had risky contacts or because their parents had to be hospitalized by COVID19.

MATERIAL RESOURCES

The inequality caused by school training through virtual methods, online, etc., has been repeatedly commented on in the media. For families with fewer resources and disengaged from new technologies, this is a serious problem that administrations are trying to alleviate with the distribution of devices in some territories.

In the case of residential care, the lack of a sufficient number of devices such as desktop computers, laptops, tablets, etc., has been commented on by some administrations and agencies, although there is great variability in this matter. The problem of a sufficient number of computers and other devices had been already detected in our researches during previous years in various territories. It was common in some homes that the computers used by educators to work were the same to be used by children and adolescents in a timely manner and for moments of school work or leisure. Consequently, situations occurred where several educators and several children could need the devices simultaneously and it was very difficult due to the limited number of them. In addition, there were homes in which these devices were old and not enough efficient for requirements like the current ones. The same was true when Internet connections did not have good broadband coverage.

In this new situation, many children and adolescents need to follow their school activity online with their teachers and difficulties have arisen in having a sufficient number of computers. Added to these school assignments is the need to connect with friends and their social networks, as well as contact with their families of origin (this topic is discussed later) and, in some cases, with their therapists. This intensive use by young people is added to the very considerable increase in the use of computers by staff for virtual meetings at very different levels, more frequent follow-up reporting, etc.

In this spectacular multiplication of the need for devices, children's homes face a very different level of resources, from those who were already well endowed, to those who already had a shortage of connection or devices and were experiencing very difficult situations. Some administrations have provided tablets to their foster homes and other mobile devices.

One of the lessons that we believe is very important from this crisis, but that reveals a latent need long ago, is that in the education of children and adolescents, today, devices and access to networks are essential and compulsory material to promote educational opportunities that do not perpetuate the inequality of these children and young people. On the other hand, these devices are currently a very affordable investment and there would be no excuse for staff, boys and girls to have the most appropriate resources.

SPECIFIC SANITARY RESOURCES

As was happening in society in general, and even in the health system, the availability of masks, gloves and protective equipment was very low in the first weeks. Administrations distributed these materials for children's homes in almost all territories, but in very limited quantities. Over the weeks, it has become easier to have materials and in some territories, instructions were given to use a mask during all working hours, making this material available to all households.

Likewise, in recent weeks, the need for rapid tests to be applied in cases that: are new income, are returned after authorizations to live with family members, or return after running away is being considered in some territories.

HUMAN RESOURCES, LABOR ORGANIZATION AND MANAGEMENT

As discussed in the first section, very few cases had been detected in staff, but frequent leaves due to the need to pass preventive quarantines for possible contacts with infected people. This has generated the need to have pools of professionals willing to be recruited in case of need.

Some agencies have employed more reinforcement staff given the need to attend to the longer presence of children and adolescents in the children's homes. On the one hand,

for school activities that need the support of adults and help to be carried out at home, and on the other, to facilitate creativity and organization for the wide margin of leisure during confinement.

Technical support teams (psychologists, social workers, pedagogues, etc.) were working from home to prevent adults from entering and leaving homes. In some territories, counseling and psychological support (at a distance) is reinforced with the professionals of the child welfare services or other support programs for families, directly attending to children, youth and residential staff.

Shift changes are reported in all the territories and agencies in order to facilitate fewer personnel changes during the day. Intensive shifts have been established, sometimes for several continuing days to avoid changes.

In some administrations the documentation and reporting tasks have been relaxed to reinforce direct attention to the children and young people groups.

In the case of agencies that manage several children's homes, it is common to have created work groups or groups with specific responsibilities: material purchases, organization of school or leisure activities, prevention and health regulations, etc. It is common to create WhatsApp groups between these teams, as well as hold online meetings with high frequency. Management teams maintain constant contact and communication through virtual means. In all management and coordination tasks, the chat groups created by the agencies and between administrations and agencies are playing a very important role.

It is very noteworthy that in various territories and agencies it is mentioned that the staff have volunteered to work reinforcing other homes that needed it or to provide exceptional services.

SCHOOL MONITORING AND TRAINING

All teaching activity has been suspended in its classroom mode and depends on online teaching. The fundamental problem has been the mentioned lack of resources and Internet connections, having obsolete or insufficient devices in some homes and problems of fast internet connection in others.

On the other hand, with some differences by communities, there are several problems to highlight (some of them very similar to those that many families are experiencing in their homes):

a) In general, the load of homework was considered excessive (impossible to fulfill even with adequate means) and also coordination problems were reported due to different teachers requesting a lot of homework without realizing the final amount.

b) Use of very different platforms and applications between schools that require a great diversity of media in homes.

c) Lack of response from some teachers to the student tasks, lack of feedback and assessment of those tasks performed. This discourages some students who do not receive a response to their work and do not feel accompanied in school work.

d) Difficulty of the ratios in some homes to give individualized support to all children and young people.

e) The lack of adaptation of the tasks to the possibilities of each case is especially highlighted. A large number of children are in need of curricular adaptations (more than a quarter according to our recent studies in residential care in Spain) and the tasks are not adapted for these cases, making them excessive and very difficult.

However, there are also some experiences of intensifying the relationship between the educational system and child welfare services, both to provide materials that allow academic monitoring and to receive school reinforcement programs.

BIRTH FAMILIES

The general rule has been to suspend any family visits and outings to their homes. In some communities, proposals are accepted for particular or special situations that must have permission from the authority. Again, this situation is supplemented with contacts by video calls or other means of communication, with the aforementioned limitations of resources, but in general the experience is being positively valued. To alleviate these difficulties, the restrictions on mobile phone calls for teens (restriction of time, during activities, etc.) have also been relaxed to allow them more contact with family and friends. Telematic and telephone contacts have also been facilitated with volunteer

support families (weekend outings, etc.) with which boys and girls were already in contact.

It is very important to emphasize that in several communities an effort has been made to send children to their biological families in cases where conditions made this possible, with remote support from the educators themselves or, in other places, from child care professionals. They are evaluating the experience in various communities very positively, managing to reduce the occupation of places in some homes and carry out joint work with families of origin. The case of one of the territories that has placed 34 children with their families of origin stands out, as well as others with educators and specialized foster care, freeing up to a total of 61 places in anticipation of space needs for isolation.

Following instructions from the Ministry, the services are prepared for possible placement of volunteer guards due to parents entering hospitals. Very few cases have occurred.

TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

It has been decided not to carry out any termination of the child care placement due to legal age, carrying out extensions when necessary. In one of the territories, two floors were opened for young people who reached the age of majority during confinement. For support programs for care leavers, telephone contacts for follow-ups have been increased.

UNNACCOMPANIED MIGRANT CHILDREN

In the territories of greatest arrival of groups of unaccompanied foreign minors, there have been serious problems for new group arrivals, due to the need for spaces of initial isolation, although the numbers of these cases seem to have decreased in these first weeks of this COVID crisis.

On the other hand, in these cases, the documentation processes have been slowed by the closure or slowdown of the administrative offices that manage them.

HEALTH MEASURES

All the homes have carried out an intensive display of information for the children and young people creating posters, putting on videos, talks, debates, etc., about the coronavirus, the pandemic and especially the means and habits of personal protection. Children's homes, like the rest of the population, have been able to avail themselves of special government permits to be able to go for walks with minors with specific problems, such as the case of autism spectrum disorder, etc. In some territories, the public entity itself has issued permits for these cases in coordination with law enforcement.

In many homes, children and staff (at the entrance) are taking their temperature daily, preparing informative reports for the local authority. Some public entities have contracted disinfection companies in their homes to periodically disinfect the different spaces thoroughly. In some territory, the Military Emergency Unit proceeded to disinfect and clean many of their children's homes facilities, and its troops also interacted with children and youth, informing them of the importance of their behavior in the pandemic and congratulating them for it.

THE EXPERIENCES OF CONFINEMENT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND CHILDREN

In general, the situation was being handled fairly well, with very few incidents of conflict or leakage. These problems were being located in homes for adolescents with behavioral problems where there have been more critical episodes. The leaks were being reported to the police immediately, requiring preventive isolation time on the way back. In cases of recidivism, referrals have been made to the juvenile prosecutor's office and in some communities, juvenile penal measures have been ordered to enter the young offenders centre for recidivism.

In several entities and territories, it is reported that they are observing that some children and adolescents with behavioral problems are improving their state, probably due to the lack of pressure for school attendance and the intense rhythms of the school weeks. There is less conflict, fewer leaks and more cooperation in daily life. In several

territories the positive surprise is expressed that it has been for educators to see this reaction of children and young people.

DAILY LIFE

There is no doubt that an enormous challenge has been posed to organize daily life to create a rewarding and entertaining climate, with new highly motivating activities, very diverse workshops, and strong participation of children and young people in proposals. The assessment made is unanimously positive and the willingness of staff and children to create this dynamic of daily life is underlined.

Some activities that are mentioned have been: costume competition, makeup and hairdressing workshops, photography workshops, board and online games, hobbies, video-forum, painting and cartoon workshop, sports and maintenance activities (ping-pong, crossfit, zumba ...), etc. Videos and murals have also been produced to support other homes and other children in similar situations.

Where there are larger children's homes that have different groups, they are kept in separate activities without contact between groups for leisure activities, meals, etc. Each group coexists as independently as possible.

Special control is performed on boys and girls who go out to work, with daily temperature measurements and life apart from the group. Unfortunately, many have stopped working due to the economic crisis.

FINAL EVALUATION: AN EXPERIENCE OF COHESION, INVOLVEMENT AND MATURITY

It is frequently commented that the situation has generated an experience of support and cohesion in households and also among those who are part of networks, by territory or by belonging to the same entity, in different locations. They are contacted very frequently, new responsibilities are distributed, new teams are formed, there is a mobilization of voluntary effort to reinforce shifts or entities and many ideas and suggestions for activities or strategies are shared.

There is an atmosphere of experiencing team cohesion and working in the same direction that is highly valued and in a general way, including the efforts of the children and young people themselves (for example: cases of adolescents helping the youngest on homeworks).

In summary, the problems are derived from the situation itself and its complexity, as well as the lack of greater and better resources, especially technological and health. However, the contribution and effort of professionals and managers stands out above all, along with the good behavior and involvement of the vast majority of children and adolescents. The latter are intensely involved in this opportunity to cooperate and take responsibility for those issues that require it.

We end this report with a summary phrase from the head of residential care of a public entity that summarizes these conclusions very well:

“I think we are achieving good results so far... thanks to the ability to respond as a system and as a department with a message of calm, the experience of working with groups in crisis, the committed response of professionals and the habit especially worked in last four years of generating co-construction processes, some entities with each other and all with the families and people welcomed.”