Why aren't the left getting behind those left behind from lockdowns?

*Lockdown is hard for nearly everyone, but it is much worse for the poorest in society and those suffering from mental health problems and loneliness. **Paul Dolan (LSE)** asks why the left has been so vocal in its support for the harshest lockdown measures, including closing schools and banning people from socialising – even in their own gardens.*

Since March, we have had [daily updates on COVID-19 deaths](#). These numbers are devoid of any context at all, not even the number of deaths from other causes. Since March, virus suppression policies have had a deleterious effect on the life experiences and mental health of most sections of society. They have been especially harmful for disadvantaged children, those on the lowest incomes, those at greatest risk of losing their jobs, and those who are most susceptible to mental health problems and loneliness.

We live a world of great uncertainty and no one can confidently claim to know what the right set of policy responses should be. But despite this, or indeed because of it, you might expect that at least some of those on the left of British politics would be outspoken critics of some of the lockdown measures. Quite the opposite. Almost without exception, they have been the ones who have been most vocal in their support for the most stringent virus suppression policies, emphasising those who are most vulnerable to the virus and not the welfare of those most vulnerable to the policy responses.

Following the recommendations of SAGE, who are ill-equipped to consider the various trade-offs between health, economic and social impacts, let alone any distributional effects, the Labour leader Keir Starmer and Labour mayor of London Sadiq Khan have called for a "circuit-breaker" lockdown. Andy Burnham, the Labour mayor of Greater Manchester, who has rightly pushed back against the government moving Manchester from Tier 2 to Tier 3 restrictions without a more generous support package, has also voiced support for the suggested two-week lockdown. In Wales, which has already embarked on a 'firebreak', schools have closed to pupils in Year 9 and above.

The fundamental problem is that further restrictions will serve to widen the inequalities in mental health and loneliness, whatever rescue packages are put in place. Data from the Office for National Statistics show that more than [one in four people in the UK are currently lonely always, often or some of the time.](#) The last time it was this high was back in May.

Even more troubling, perhaps, around 100,000 vulnerable children are currently missing from schools, many of who are at risk of being drawn into drug dealing. Schools should never have closed in the first place – but now that we know so much more about both the virus risks and the consequences of closing them, it baffles me how anyone, whatever their political persuasion, could argue for schools to close for even another day, causing yet further harm to what is fast becoming a lost generation of children.

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The political right has, in fact, been more critical of lockdown measures than the left. Those on the right are more supportive of capitalism and so have tended to worry more about the consequences of lockdown for economic activity. Many on the left view the current crisis as an opportunity to rein in some of the excesses of a consumption-driven economy, reduce inequalities, and tackle the climate emergency. These are laudable ambitions, but now is not the time for this debate when so many people are experiencing loneliness and mental health problems as a direct result of lockdowns.

The restrictions placed on liberties and freedoms from lockdown measures are also likely to be of greater concern to those on the right who tend to be much more libertarian than those on the left. In general, the right thinks that people can be trusted to make up their own minds about what to do, whilst the left have much less faith in the ability of people to make the "right" choices. Whilst many on the right have expressed unease at the state's incursions into our lives, the left has been relatively relaxed about measures that prescribe who is and who is not allowed into our own gardens.

Surely, we should all be concerned about the heavy hand of the state. History is littered with examples of governments appropriating powers in times of crisis, only for those powers to remain in place long after the crisis is over. As a Professor of Behavioural Science, I know how misguided and mistaken our preferences can be. But this does not mean that the state is better placed to decide for us. The left's faith in the role of the state to micro-manage our behaviour at this time of crisis is both naïve and patronising.

This would be forgivable if the left had its priorities right. But we have been let down in this regard. Many vulnerable people face significant challenges and risks from being at home. They have been largely ignored in the current obsession with virus transmission rates. It is now time for more people from across the political spectrum – and especially on the left – to speak up for those whose lives are being blighted by lockdown policies that disproportionately affect precisely the kinds of disadvantaged groups that we should all be championing.

Most urgently, perhaps, we need to minimise the harms being caused to children and young people who are at the least risk from the virus and yet have borne the biggest burden to their lives and their mental health in trying to suppress it. This will serve the left especially well in the longer term because they depend much more on the support of younger voters than the right does. But above all, even in an uncertain world, it is surely the morally right thing to do – whatever our political allegiances.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the COVID-19 blog, nor LSE.