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# The Impact of COVID-19 on Children, Young People, and Families in Sihanoukville, Cambodia: The Mitigating Work of M'Lop Tapang

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## ABSTRACT

Globally, children have been adversely affected by the wide variety of impacts of SARS-CoV-2 (Coronavirus | COVID-19). Vulnerable children who depend on the support of education and health and social care systems were left unprotected as these systems were weakened by the pandemic. COVID-19 has exposed the already fragile situations in which many children and young people live and that thousands of children and young people would need ongoing support but remained invisible to statutory authorities. COVID-19 has also been a stark reminder of the vulnerability of individuals and societies and it has exposed deep divisions, inequalities, and injustices between different countries and groups of people. M'Lop Tapang is a local nonprofit organization registered with the Royal Government of Cambodia. This report discusses the efforts of M'Lop Tapang following the declaration of the COVID-19 global pandemic in early 2020, to address the local community needs; to ensure the voices of children remained heard; and to promote children's rights remaining a priority throughout the remainder of the pandemic.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

COVID-19; inequalities; child;  
pandemic; poverty;  
humanitarian assistance

## What is already known on this topic

- Vulnerable children are dependent on remaining visible to education and health and social care systems to ensure they are safeguarded and protected.
- Poor safety, financial instability, unemployment, challenges to children's rights and displacement all have the potential to increase vulnerabilities and intensify inequalities.
- The COVID-19 global pandemic has widened the global lens for the nursing profession and to effect change, children's nurses need to think globally and act locally.

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### What this study adds

- This study provides insights into the challenges faced by children and families in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, during the early part of the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic in 2020–2021.
- The economic impact of COVID-19 on children and families living in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, between 2020 and 2021 is reviewed.
- The learning from the pragmatic and rapid interventions of M'Lop Tapang, Sihanoukville during the early phase of the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic, are of use in other countries around the world in future epidemic or pandemic situations.

## Introduction

The children's nursing profession recognizes global health is inseparable from local and national health, and COVID-19 has truly strengthened this concept. Infectious diseases do not recognize borders and as nurses we need to understand the complexity involved in how interconnected we are and how inequality and vulnerability can be exacerbated by such large global events. Having the ability to think globally helps us to see how what happens in distant places affects health and health care locally and helps deepen our perspectives on global issues, to increase knowledge and understanding of global politics, policies, and our growing interdependence (Salvage & White, 2020).

Lack of agreement and effective global policy on issues such as the finance needed to effect climate and environmental change can have significant impacts on global health. A failure to develop policy on a macro level can affect the environments in which people live. Poor safety, financial instability, unemployment, challenges to children's rights and displacement all have the potential to increase vulnerabilities and intensify inequalities. Local nuances, in areas such as Sihanoukville, Cambodia, in this report can also add to contextualized risk, thus broadening the complexity of keeping the most vulnerable safe. COVID-19 has widened the global lens for the nursing profession and to effect change, children's nurses need to think globally and act locally. Children's nurses are the voices and advocates for some of the most vulnerable children in society and learning from the following report on a "distant" place can be transferred locally to support a collective approach to safeguarding all children.

On 27 January 2020, Cambodia confirmed its first cases of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which leads to COVID-19. By the end of 2020 there had been 374 confirmed cases and zero deaths. From January 2020 to 8 November 2021 there were 119,092 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Cambodia with 2,829 deaths, clearly indicating an upturn in cases throughout 2021 (World Health Organization, *n.d.*).

Although cases and deaths in Cambodia may have been lower than in other countries in early 2020, the social and economic impacts of the pandemic for the people of Cambodia have been extensive. COVID-19 has adversely affected Cambodia's main drivers of economic growth – tourism, manufacturing exports, and construction. An economic and social impact assessment by the United Nations Development Programme (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2020) reported that the likely consequences of the

pandemic would include more people clustering around the poverty line; potentially large increases in the poverty headcount; and high levels of household indebtedness. As is most often the case, it is those already living in poverty, the kinds of families that M’Lop Tapang works with, that have been most adversely affected.

The COVID-19 crisis arrived on the back of a series of already poor economic news for the region, and a survey among the families M’Lop Tapang works with revealed that already vulnerable families were struggling more to meet the basic needs of their children because of increased financial hardships (M’Lop Tapang, 2020).

Protecting and promoting children’s rights, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), is at the very heart of M’Lop Tapang’s values, services, and strategy. This has remained the case ever since the organization was launched and was no different throughout the pandemic. During the early part of the pandemic, the M’Lop Tapang team were very aware that school closures, social isolation, and economic hardships could lead to an increased risk for child abuse and neglect. From the point the pandemic took hold there was a significant increase in the number of children and young people on the streets and beaches and this required re-assessment of their needs to monitor their situation, increase awareness of the M’Lop Tapang center, promote the child safety hotlines, and the delivery of emergency care where needed (M’Lop Tapang, 2020). Similar scenarios were also evident in the United Kingdom (UK) with UNICEF (2020) reporting that children and young people’s health, wellbeing, and futures were at risk due to a wide variety of factors (Figure 1).

It is clear, from Figure 1 that the factors adversely affecting children included children missing out on weeks of in-school education; decimation of social contact; and higher levels of abuse. In addition, in the UK, the inequity toward children was further exemplified by children being prohibited from submitting questions to the UK government for the daily COVID-19 briefings, blatantly ignoring children’s rights. This stance completely devalued the expertise that children had to bring, silenced their voices and arguably breached their human rights (Rowland & Cook, 2020).

Like M’Lop Tapang, many UK charities have safeguarding central to their core business and recognized the various political and policy responses to COVID-19 in heightening the risk of child maltreatment (The Children’s Society, 2019; NSPCC, 2020). Both in the UK and in Cambodia, charities working with the most vulnerable recognize the protective factors offered by communities and education. With forced closures of schools and social isolation, this can magnify the risk to children and young people already experiencing abuse

School closures	Increased risk of online abuse
Poor nutrition due to food insecurity	Increased risk of abuse at home
Employment and financial losses	Social isolation
Reduced access to stretched healthcare systems	Voice of the child being absent from decisions made about their lives

**Figure 1.** Factors associated with compromised children’s health, wellbeing, and futures during the pandemic.

and neglect at home and other contexts; having fewer interactions with the services and social institutions designed to help has the potential to weaken safeguards. The combined impact of increased stressors on caregivers, increased child vulnerability, and reduced safeguards increases the potential for new and recurring cases of abuse in all its forms (NSPCC, 2020).

This review report aims to bring together data collected by M'Lop Tapang in 2020 and 2021 with a view to understanding the impact of COVID-19 on children, young people, and families in Sihanoukville, Cambodia. A discussion will bring together the key themes with comparison to the impacts of COVID-19 on children and young people in the UK. Learning from both countries will hopefully support strategies that promote the safety and wellbeing of children and young people from a global perspective.

### ***Ethical approval***

As a service development initiative, research ethics approval was not required or appropriate. However, all participants (both children and adults) were fully briefed before engagement in the project, took part voluntarily, and were free to disengage from part or all of the work without needing to provide a reason. This report details the secondary data analysis of the initial summary report produced by M'Lop Tapang, and ethical approval is unnecessary for that secondary analysis of a service development initiative to take place.

### **Method**

This review brings together data collected from three surveys conducted by M'Lop Tapang in May 2020 (survey one), October 2020 (survey two), and June 2021 (survey three). Survey one involved staff from M'Lop Tapang conducting semi-structured interviews with families they worked with, asking them about the impact of the economic downturn during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews generated both qualitative and quantitative data. Survey two, using the same methodology, was conducted in October 2020. The final survey, utilizing structured interview questions, took place in June 2021 and aimed to evaluate the impact of emergency food distribution during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This evaluation reported in this review brings together the results from all three surveys to enable comparisons to be made throughout the progress of the COVID-19 pandemic in Southwest Cambodia, not least because of the significant rise in COVID-19 cases in Cambodia in early 2021.

### ***Initiative design***

The research design used surveys to collate both quantitative and qualitative data. Data was collected from families using surveys that were administered via structured interviews. The interviews were then manually analyzed and transcribed. Quantitative data was entered into Microsoft Excel for analysis. Qualitative data was extracted from the interview records by members of the research team and then analyzed to establish themes

### **Recruitment and approvals**

All families that were receiving support from M'Lop Tapang were asked to complete the survey.

### **Participants and facilitators**

**Survey one.** Survey one was undertaken in May 2020 and involved 154 families who were receiving services from M'Lop Tapang at that time. These 154 families had a total of 533 children (a mean of 3.5 children per family).

**Survey two.** Survey two was a follow-up survey, in October 2020, with 150 of the 154 families interviewed in survey one. The interviews conducted in survey two aimed to assess the impact of M'Lop Tapang's emergency food distribution activities. These 150 families had a total of 734 family members living in their households.

**Survey three.** The final survey in June 2021 consisted of interviews with 214 individuals (including adults with caring responsibilities) that were among those that had received emergency food support from M'Lop Tapang. On average, there were five family members living in the households of the people interviewed.

### **Data collection and compilation**

Data was collected from families using surveys that were administered via interview. The interviews were then manually analyzed and transcribed. Quantitative data was entered into Excel for analysis. Qualitative data was extracted from the interview records by members of the research team and then analyzed to establish themes.

## **Results**

### **Financial impact of COVID-19**

#### **Survey one (May 2020)**

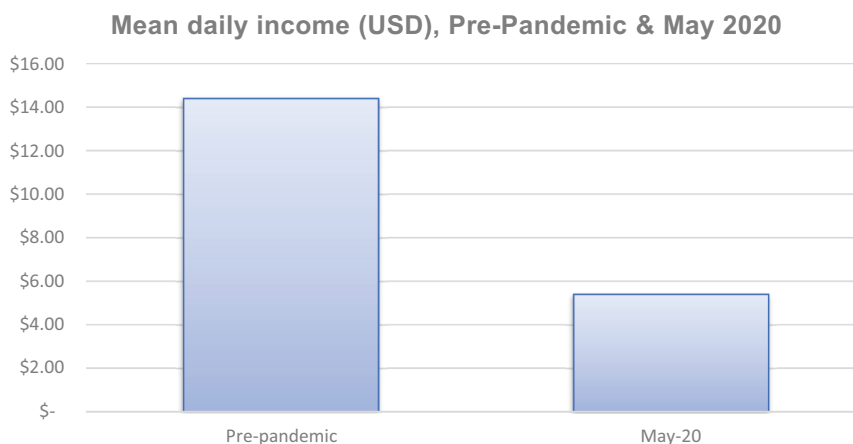
Ninety-seven percent of the families interviewed reported a decreased income over the preceding two months with 77% of families reporting a decrease in income of greater than 50%. One-fifth (21%) of families reported having no income whatsoever in May 2020, with significant worries being reported by some respondents, as exemplified by the quotation in [Figure 2](#).

The mean reported daily income dropped from \$14.70 USD pre-pandemic to \$5.40 USD in May 2020 in the early phase of the pandemic ([Figure 3](#)).

For those respondents who reported a decrease in income, the effects on the respondent and their family were stark ([Table 1](#)).

*"Before COVID-19 I used to make about \$10 to \$12.5 a day, but now I can only make about \$5 a day, and sometimes nothing. If the situation stays the same as now, my family will have a lot more problems."*

**Figure 2.** Quote from an interview conducted in survey one, revealing significant worries for the future.



**Figure 3.** Mean daily income in the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Sihanoukville, Cambodia.

**Table 1.** Impact on families of a decrease in income (Sihanoukville, Cambodia) [Survey one;  $n = 154$  families].

Area of impact	Families reporting this impact [n (%)]
Less food for family or children	125 (81%)
Reduced quality of food	97 (63%)
Not enough money to pay back debts	49 (32%)
Not enough money to pay rent	43 (28%)
Not enough money to pay for transport to M'Lop Tapang to obtain free healthcare	35 (23%)
Needed to borrow money	32 (21%)
Increased violence or arguments at home said to be due to stress	25 (16%)
Children now needing to work to help earn income for the family	20 (13%)
Not fixing urgent house repairs	17 (11%)
Started dangerous or illegal work	5 (3%)

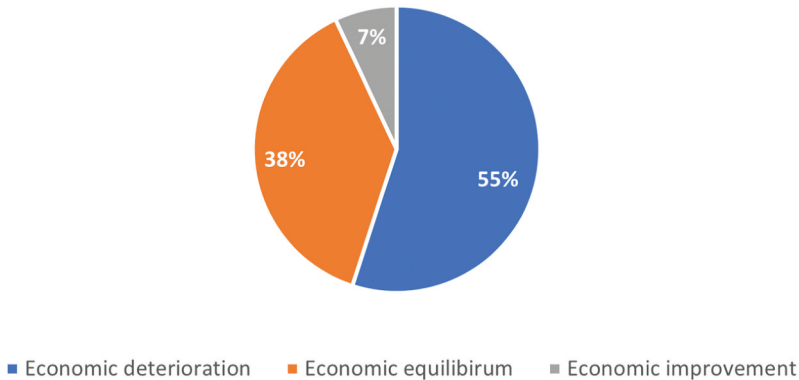
### **Survey two (October 2020)**

Fifty-five percent of the families interviewed reported that their economic situation had deteriorated over the previous four months. Only just over a third (38%) of families reported that their economic situation has stayed the same (Figure 4). Over half of those interviewed reported they did not have any idea about when the economic situation was expected to improve.

In response to increased family needs, since the COVID-19 pandemic began the teams at M'Lop Tapang have provided emergency food support to approximately 1,000 families with whom they work. Most of these families have received this support multiple times since March 2020.

Sreymom (name changed for confidentiality purposes), a mother of five young children, is typical of the parents to whom M'Lop Tapang's teams have been providing support. Already living in poverty and struggling to get by day-to-day, the impact of COVID-19 has made their situation even more bleak. Sreymom's husband is a construction laborer, but like many unskilled workers, had working possibilities reduced during the pandemic, resulting in a lower income with which to support the family, including to obtain food (Figure 5).

## Economic situation for families in October 2020 compared with May 2020



**Figure 4.** Economic situation for families in survey two (October 2020) compared with survey one (May 2020).

*“Before, I used to be able to cook about 1kg of rice for each meal to feed my family. After Covid happened we now have less work and less money so we can’t do that anymore. With less money we could only buy 1kg of rice and had to make it last for two days. Sometimes it meant that we were still hungry. Now M’Lop Tapang is helping and my children aren’t hungry anymore.”*

**Figure 5.** Quote from an interview conducted in survey two, revealing food poverty being ameliorated by the interventions from M’Lop Tapang.

The subjective, perceived impacts on families if M’Lop Tapang stopped providing food support during the pandemic were explored with respondents (Figure 6).

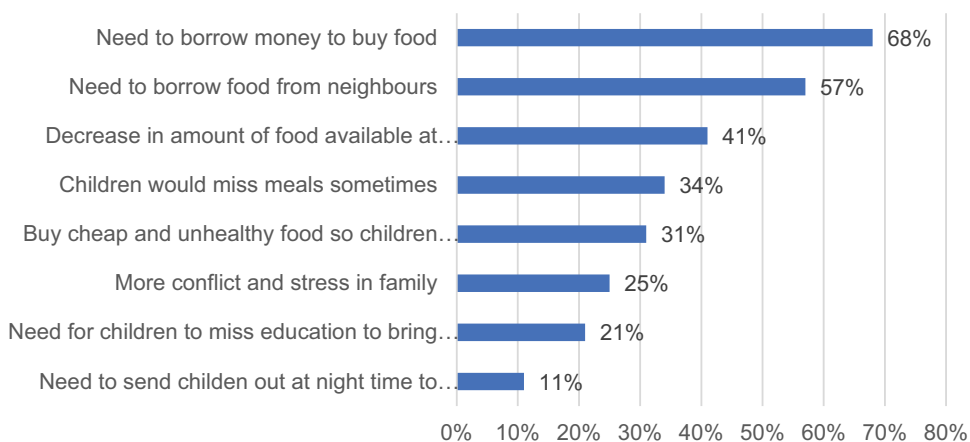
### Survey three (June 2021)

In June 2021, 214 individual respondents took part in survey three. Of these 214 individuals, 152 (71%) reported they were in a worse economic situation compared to six months previously; 66 (31%) respondents reported having zero income at that time with examples of dire social circumstances (Figure 7); and 58 (27%) respondents reported that their economic situation had stayed the same compared with six months previously. Significant impacts of the June 2021 economic situation were reported (Figure 8).

## Discussion

The proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child” (whose origins are unknown) can help us to understand the philosophy that underpins M’Lop Tapang. It is recognized that children and young people are usually connected to larger kinship groups and communities that help with childcare and other tasks (Seymour, 2013 in Quinn and

## Impacts reported by families of reduced income



**Figure 6.** Reported subjective view of the likely impact if M'Lop Tapang withdrew food support during the pandemic [Survey two;  $n=150$  families].

*"I do not have a job now because the shop I worked in closed. I have no income at all, and it has been 2 months already that I have not paid my rent, electricity, or water. I feel ashamed when I see the landlord, but I do not have any money yet. I am so happy that we have food support from M'Lop Tapang. I never had to ask for that before."*

**Figure 7.** Quote from an interview conducted in survey three.

Area of impact	Families reporting this impact [n (%)]
Buy less food than before	66%
Have borrowed money to buy food	60%
Borrowed food from neighbours	56%
Sometimes decrease the amount of food at meals	54%
Not paid some debts or bills because need to buy food	35%
<i>More debt than before</i>	31%
Run out of food or miss meals	29%
Buy food on credit from neighbour-seller	27%
More stress in family	25%

**Figure 8.** Reported impact of the economic situation (June 2021) in Sihanoukville, Cambodia (Survey three; June 2021.  $n=214$  individuals).

Mageo, 2013). That village does not need to be a physical place and it can be the people, the values, and the ethics that surround a child during their upbringing. This is helpful to understand when there is increased diversity and challenge due to environmental and resource limitations on family life (Demaria et al., 2020). The arrival of the global pandemic immediately challenged the environments in which the children and young people of Sihanoukville, Cambodia, lived, resources available to their families also rapidly diminished. It is collectively understood that global child health is the same as local child health and in this interconnected world brought closer by COVID-19, children's nurses globally continue to work to improve the life chances of children and young people. Whilst this report looks at the impacts of COVID-19 in Cambodia, children's nurses in the UK do not need to travel far to witness vulnerability and inequality which lead to children and young people in the UK experiencing some of the health-related needs as their peers living in lower income countries (Buser & Taha, 2022). The International Society for Social Pediatrics and Child Health (2022) highlight the pandemic is a child rights crisis, challenging the long-term survival and development of children and youth worldwide. Children's services worldwide were disrupted to address the needs of adults and as result this disrupted access to health, education and social care has exacerbated health outcomes to disadvantaged children and young people (International Society for Social Pediatrics and Child Health [ISSOP], 2020) Internationally, the philosophy that underpins children's nursing practice, i.e., child- and family-centered care, needs to remain our focus if we are to advocate on behalf of children and families to effect better life chances.

COVID-19 had a negative impact on Cambodia's main drivers of economic growth – tourism, manufacturing, and construction which accounts for more than 70% of the country's growth and almost 40% of paid employment. As is most often the case, it is those already living in poverty that are most adversely affected by such situations. The local economic crisis in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, put children more at risk of separating from their families, living, or working on the streets, health problems, drug use, social isolation, discrimination, lack of education or access to safe employment, and various forms of abuse (M'Lop Tapang, 2020). With the arrival of COVID-19, M'Lop Tapang's mode of operation needed to change overnight to meet the new needs of the families it serves. UNICEF (2020) also highlighted that other countries such as the UK were seeing how COVID-19 was exposing the already fragile situations in which many children and young people live and that thousands of children and young people would need support during the pandemic but remained invisible to authorities. Save the Children (2020) also highlighted that the pandemic has been a stark reminder of the vulnerability of individuals and societies and that it has exposed deep divisions, inequalities, and injustices between different countries and groups of people. The rights of children are a fundamental goal of all policies; however, children and their rights are compounded by the multi-layered presentation of COVID-19 and the growing crisis it poses for the most seldom heard groups in society.

Reflecting on the data collected M'Lop Tapang in May 202, October 2020 and June 2021, some clear themes emerged from the impact of COVID-19 on the children, young people, and families in Sihanoukville, Cambodia:

- Reduced safety
- Financial insecurity
- Increased risk of harm
- Adverse impact on education

One of the most striking findings was that within the first eight weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, 97% of the families interviewed reported a decreased income. This sudden drop in income is of significance for children, young people, and families who are already on the edges of poverty and will have life-changing significance if they are already in debt, have no savings or no bank account. A report by the United Nations Development Programme (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2021) estimated poverty to have almost doubled in Cambodia due to the COVID-19 pandemic, climbing to 17.6% of the population. In comparison, UNICEF (2020) reported that families in the UK also faced uncertain financial futures because of the economic crisis triggered by COVID-19, explaining that children in the UK faced food insecurity because of the impact of job losses and debt on family finances. A common thread for families working with M'Lop Tapang was the inability to earn a living, with food security a major worry. Disruption to education also meant that children and young people were not only missing out on learning but were also cut off from access to daily nutritional support hygiene, free medical care, and social support in a safe environment. Stricter lockdowns also meant families could not access food supplies and government interventions were inadequate in meeting all those that needed help (Figure 9).

Similarly, in the UK, UNICEF (2020) reported that the loss of free school meals and school closures will have far-reaching impacts on the health and well-being of children. School closures and the loss of early years provision are likely to widen the attainment gap, which sees children from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve poorer results at school. This gap, which can lead to entrenched inequalities that follow children throughout their lives, is already a major concern in the UK with unacceptable levels of disadvantage suffered by children and young people in the UK's most deprived areas (Pickett et al., 2021).

Across all three surveys conducted by M'Lop Tapang, the pandemic, and its associated consequences, resulted in increased risk and reduced safety for children and young people. The cause of this was multi-factorial including increased family stressors as a result of reduced incomes, social isolation, and school closures. Families also reported that their children needed to work to generate income due to reduced financial income and lack of job

"A 7-year-old boy, was in one of the classrooms at our Education Centre drawing pictures with some other children. The staff in the room noticed that he could barely keep hold of his colouring pencils and could not focus on the task very well. The teacher sat down to talk with him and learned that although he did have some 'bor-bor' (porridge) at our centre earlier in the morning, he was still very hungry. The night before, with almost no food left in their house, he, his six siblings, and his parents had almost nothing to eat. The entire meal for the nine family members consisted of only three packages of instant noodles shared between all of them."

**Figure 9.** Case study of food poverty.

security. In May 2020, 16% of those interviewed said there was increased violence or arguments at home due to stress and 13% interviewed said children were then working to help earn income for their families. Both circumstances involve abuses of children's rights with significant likelihood to adversely affect their wellbeing and/or development. In October 2020 conflict and stress in the family was reported by 25% of interviewees. Twenty-one percent of respondents said children needed to miss education to generate income during the day and 11% said they needed to send children out to generate income at night. The dangers involved in children undertaking work at night are obvious and include the risk of abuse, including child sexual exploitation. By June 2021, 25% of interviewees reported more family stress and a further 8% said children had then started working on the streets. Cambodia has a fledgling social work system, and as a result M'Lop Tapang continued to partner with the ChildSafe movement (Friends International, n.d.) during the pandemic to create a "village" of safe and trusted networks for children and young people. The ChildSafe movement is a global effort aimed at recognizing the abuse and neglect faced by millions of marginalized children across the world. With increased knowledge of families suffering additional stressors, M'Lop Tapang reviewed their child protection strategies to increase protection and reduce risk. M'Lop Tapang's 24-hour confidential child protection hotline was publicized widely throughout Sihanoukville and in 2020, there was an increase of approximately 50% in the number of calls compared with 2019, and a further 50% increase in the period between January and June 2021. During the pandemic, M'Lop Tapang saw having strong community-based systems as helpful. One of those was the network of community ChildSafe agents with 126 new community ChildSafe agents in Sihanoukville were recruited, trained, and certified. The "Kids beach network" is a "youth protecting youth" program and this was also strengthened by training more young people to help keep children safe who work on beaches (M'Lop Tapang, 2020, n.d.).

While working in the informal economy, children's experiences of human rights are being violated along with the additional risks due to the nature of their employment which often includes employment-related specific risks, abuse, and exploitation. Street children, as a group, tend to possess two distinctive characteristics – precarious family relations and an active economic life, to meet basic needs. To these children, a "job," regardless of how exploitative and hazardous it may be, is critical and often the only mechanism for survival (M. H. Reza & Bromfield, 2019).

The UK has also seen an increase in stressors to families due to the impacts of COVID-19. Many families have faced financial insecurity, alterations to their routine, and the juggling of multiple responsibilities including work, full-time childcare, and care for family members who may be shielding or ill (NSPCC, 2020). When adequate support is not available, the tensions caused by the often-competing demands may lead to mental and emotional health adversity and the use of negative coping strategies. Children and young people living in households experiencing financial insecurity, and/or where a parent experiences a mental health disorder, are more likely to have a probable mental health condition themselves (Mikolai et al., 2020). These impacts could be deemed as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), which often persist into adulthood, and can have substantial personal and socioeconomic consequences. People who have experienced four or more ACEs are at a significantly increased risk of chronic disease, as well as mental illness and health risk behaviors (Boullier & Blair, 2018). Although the team at M'Lop Tapang has not yet specifically researched the mental health impacts of their children and families, it could

be inferred that the cumulation of negative impacts from the pandemic and the already existing disadvantages of living in social deprivation could result in future problems for children and young people due to these adverse childhood experiences.

A recent literature review, which examined the effects of quarantine on individuals across the globe, may very well be relevant to people living in the UK or Cambodia. The review highlights the negative psychological effects that quarantine has on individuals. These effects may include confusion, anger, and post-traumatic distress. Additionally, the study identified that participants had anxiety regarding the duration of quarantine or lockdown; fear of infection; boredom; frustration; lack of necessary supplies; lack of information or control; uncertainty about their future; and stigma (Brooks et al., 2020). For children and young people, the exacerbation of existing stressors and the introduction of additional ones for their parents and care givers could increase the risk of physical, emotional, and domestic abuse, neglect, and online harm (NSPCC, 2020). An example for increased risk in older children could be that of criminal or sexual exploitation. For example, street work increases the risk of both criminal and sexual exploitation for children in developing countries. The risk of criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation is higher for children who are not in an educational setting (for example, missing from home, missing from education, or school closures introduced by government(s) as a method of purportedly reducing COVID-19 transmission) as this makes them more accessible to those in the community who would exploit them (M. H. Reza & Bromfield, 2019).

From both a UK and Cambodian experiential point of view, COVID-19 conditions have seen the potential to increase opportunities for abuse, neglect, and exploitation through increased susceptibility (social isolation, loneliness, loss, and/or risk-taking behaviors) and reduction of protection by trusted people (educators, extended family, peers, social services, charities, and/or youth workers). As with the core principle of the Children Act (1989) in the UK, M'Lop Tapang's underpinning philosophy is that the best place for children to grow up is with their families, and if this is not safe, then in an alternative family-like setting (M'Lop Tapang, 2020). The services offered by M'Lop Tapang before the pandemic and continuing are crucial in supporting children, young people, and their families. The effects and potential future effects discussed regarding the impact of adverse childhood experiences on physical and emotional wellbeing, through to adulthood, appear to be understood by the senior leadership team at M'Lop Tapang and acknowledged through the services provided. M'Lop Tapang provides interventions, education, and support programs, that can help to reduce the burden and stress on families, thus improving the chance of parents being able to provide the nurture and care for their children. One such program – the strengthening families and communities program – supported 2000 vulnerable families to be provided with Government Identification (ID) cards. While in the UK an ID card may not appear hugely significant, in Cambodia, it is required to receive any financial support from statutory services. Furthermore, M'Lop Tapang's outreach social worker team provided services to more than 1800 families, demonstrating a real commitment to child protection during an extremely challenging time. These programs and their further development are key to helping children and young people build resilience and overcome any adverse childhood experiences. This is supported by Hardcastle et al. (2020) in their book on “inspiration from ACE's interrupters in Great Britain,” as they highlight how those individuals that overcome traumatic events in childhood do so through the support, direction, and hope of a trusted individual or service. On a more global scale, a literature review on the

nurturing care for early childhood development during the COVID-19 pandemic concluded that the support required for families and communities should include cash transfers; food packs; and/or mobile health and nutrition services, as well as regular support and monitoring by child protection teams (Shumba et al., 2020), all of which M'LoP Tapang currently provides.

Health inequalities negatively impact on child health and wellbeing, regardless of where in the world this might be. Children's nurses play a significant role in recognizing and responding to this and evidence suggests education and training is key to achieving this (Buser & Taha, 2022). In the UK, a professional framework supports children's nurses to enhance their knowledge, skills, and values in recognizing vulnerability and responding to children at risk of harm (RCN, 2019).

## Conclusions

This review brought together data collected by M'LoP Tapang in 2020 and 2021 with a view to understanding the impact of COVID-19 on children, young people, and families in Sihanoukville, Cambodia. Globally, vulnerable children who depend on effective social structures have been adversely affected by the wide variety of impacts of COVID-19.

The arrival of COVID-19 on top of an already adverse economic situation in Sihanoukville, Cambodia, only served as a stark reminder of the precarious tightrope children and families in the region segue daily. The fragility of the region and the immediate impacts of the pandemic had and continue to have for children and families was recognized by M'LoP Tapang, and they highlighted increased risk in the following areas: drug use, discrimination, social isolation, child abuse and neglect, separation from their families, living and working on the streets or beaches, adverse physical and/or mental health, lack of education, or access to safe employment. This also reflected the situation in the UK where fragile conditions were noted, in which many children and young people live, and that thousands of children and young people were at risk of similar risks such as increased abuse and neglect, sexual exploitation, social isolation, and lack of education.

Early intervention by M'LoP Tapang to mitigate some of the challenges faced by children and families was crucial. Reports by M'LoP Tapang over the course of 2020 and 2021 enabled them to understand some of the emerging themes that adversely affected the health and wellbeing of the community, i.e., reduced safety, financial insecurity, increased risk of harm, and adverse impact on education. A fledgling social care system in Cambodia only highlights the gaps in which vulnerable children and young people fall, increasing their risk of further adverse childhood experiences. In the UK, it is recognized that this gap can lead to entrenched inequalities that can follow children throughout their lives, and for both Cambodia and the UK, these unacceptable levels of disadvantage suffered by children and young people is of significant concern.

Similar scenarios were also evident in the United Kingdom (UK) with UNICEF (2020) reporting that children and young people's health, wellbeing, and futures were at risk due to a wide variety of factors (Figure 1).

The programs offered by M'LoP Tapang during the pandemic were not only provided for the immediate humane requirements of children and families but to help further build resilience with the aim of preventing and overcoming further adverse childhood

experiences. It is recognized that to interrupt adverse childhood experiences and overcome traumatic events, support, direction, and hope from people and services that surround children and young people is needed; how this looks on a practical level involves cash, food, access to health, education on child development, responsive parenting, and regular monitoring.

The idea that a “village raises a child” appears to have been lost as communities have changed, families dispersed and fragmented, and technology advances. However, it is crucial we return to the philosophy of M’Lop Tapang in that “children and young people should grow up safely within their families and communities, where they are respected, treated equally, and have a choice in their future.” In doing so, we reconnect with the foundations in which children and young people need to be nurtured in creative and safe ways, to reduce the adverse impacts of their environments and lived experience. The pandemic has reminded us that a global crisis requires a global response and how interdependent we all are; it has exposed a collective fragility. The pandemic has shone a light on how hard the most vulnerable have been hit and the need to work harder to increase resilience. It has also shown the vital importance of government action to protect our health and livelihoods and the need for transformative policies to create a more equal and sustainable world (Oxfam, 2021).

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## Authorship contributions

UC, DS, and YS designed and carried out the study and analyzed the results. AK and KG undertook a literature review, conducted further results analysis, and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. AGR edited the manuscript and provided mentoring to two of the authors. All authors approved the final manuscript prior to submission.

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