COVID-19: WMCA population and health inequalities

COVID-19 has the potential to create and widen existing health inequalities, both through the direct impacts of the virus, and the indirect impacts of the control measures imposed. While underlying health conditions increase the risk of serious consequences from infection, the economic and social response to COVID-19 has the potential to exacerbate inequalities in physical and mental health. Understanding population vulnerabilities, risk factors and inequalities is important to inform both the acute response phase and the recovery and repair phase over the longer term.

Key sectors

Many frontline key workers who are most at risk of contracting the virus may be in low paid, insecure employment. Analysis of estimate total proportion of jobs within key sectors - which includes health and social work, education, transport, agri-food sector policing, fire service, government policy and social security – shows 43.3% of WMCA jobs are within key sectors and slightly higher than national average (41.5%) and WM Region (42%). Wolverhampton has the highest proportion within WMCA of key sectors jobs (47.5%) followed by Birmingham (44.6%). Solihull has lowest proportion of key sector jobs (35.3%). Figure 1 shows the proportion of workers within key sectors for the WMCA and constituent local authorities.

Health & Social Work

The highest proportion of jobs within key sectors in WMCA is within health and social work at 14% which is higher than WM Region (13.2%) and national average (12.5%). Wolverhampton has the highest proportion within WMCA of jobs in health and social work (17.1%).

Many jobs within this sector in WMCA are in hospital activities (5.9%) which is more than national average (4.8%) and WM Region (5%). The social work sector makes up 3.2% of jobs in WMCA and is again more than national average (2.8%) and WM Region (2.9%). Sandwell has the highest proportion within WMCA of jobs within social work at 3.9% followed by Birmingham and Dudley (3.5%). Dudley has the highest proportion of jobs in residential caring (3%) followed by Wolverhampton (2.9%); this is higher than WMCA (2.3%), WM Region (2.9%) and national average (2.8%).

Agri-food sector

The agri-food sector – which includes food manufacturing, food wholesaling, food retailing and non- residential catering – totals 9.6% of jobs in WMCA which is less than national average (11.7%) and WM Region (10.8%). Sandwell has the highest proportion within WMCA of jobs within agri-food sector (12.1%) followed by Wolverhampton (11.2%). There are an estimated 3.4% jobs in WMCA within food retail which is lower than national average and WM Region (3.7%). Dudley and Sandwell have the highest proportion within WMCA of jobs in food retail (4.6%).
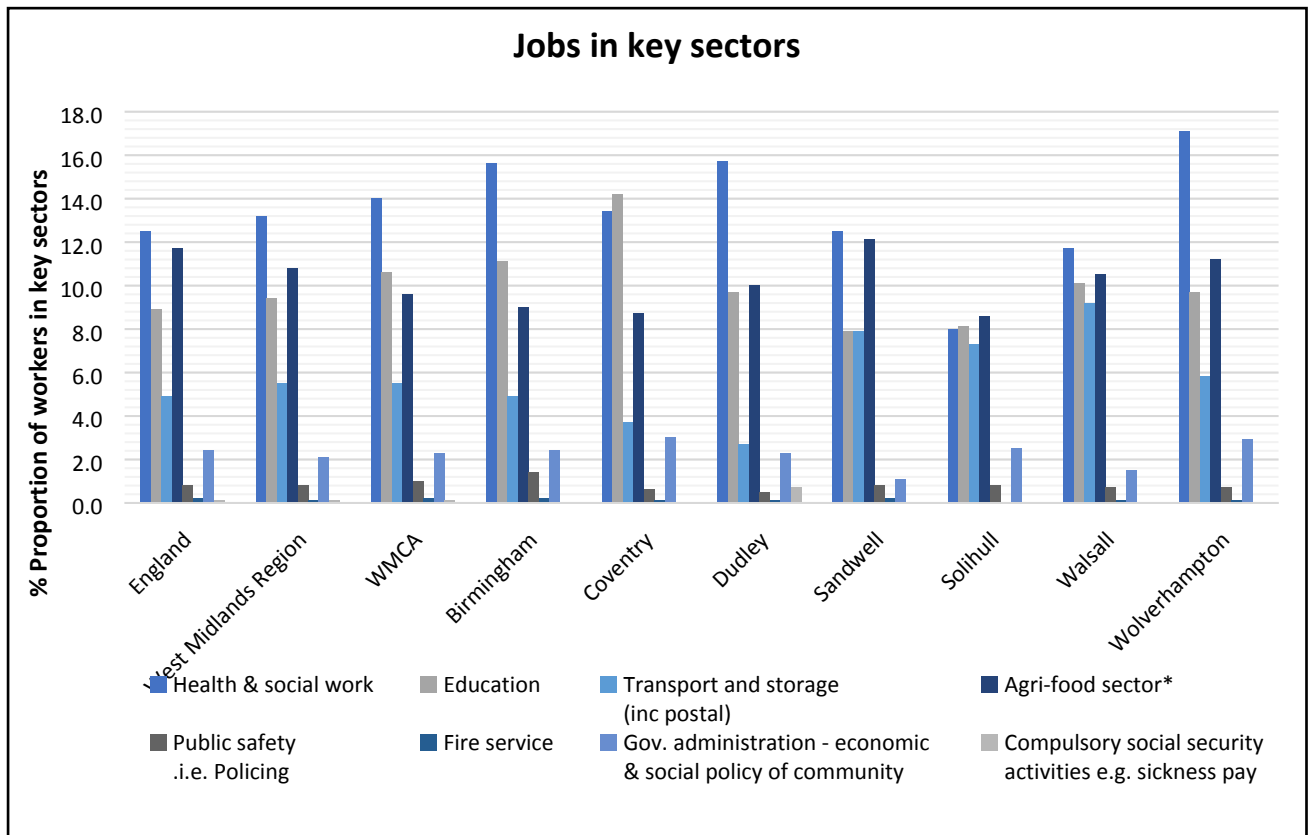
Jobs in key sectors

Legend:
- Health & social work
- Education
- Transport and storage (inc postal)
- Agri-food sector*
- Public safety .i.e. Policing
- Fire service
- Gov. administration - economic & social policy of community
- Compulsory social security activities e.g. sickness pay

Figure 1

Vulnerable sectors

Sectors which may vulnerable due to economic effects of COVID-19 leading to insecure employment and job loss include retail (excluding food retail), accommodation and food services and arts, entertainment & recreation services. Within the WMCA it is estimated that 14.8% of jobs may be within vulnerable sectors, which is less than national average (17.7%) or WM Region (15.5%). Solihull has the highest proportion within WMCA of jobs which may be vulnerable (16.2%) followed by Birmingham (15.2%).

Population aged over 75 years

This age group is known to be at greatest risk from coronavirus related health complications. An estimated 7.4% of the WMCA population is aged over 75 years old which is less than national average (8.2%) and WM Region (8.5%). Solihull has the greatest proportion within WMCA in this age bracket (10%), followed by Dudley (9.6%), and Birmingham has the lowest proportion (6.2%).

Groups requiring additional support

Mental health conditions

Social distancing and isolation can have a detrimental impact on mental health and wellbeing, including through harmful health behaviours and reducing access to services and support. There is an estimated 0.7% prevalence of dementia in the WMCA population, which is slightly less than national average and WM Region (0.8%), but this is slightly higher in Dudley at 0.9%. The WMCA has the same estimated prevalence of people with learning disabilities as national average and WM region (0.5%); this is slightly higher in Birmingham and Wolverhampton (0.6%). The WMCA has an estimated prevalence of people with serious mental illness of 1%, which is slightly higher than national average and WM region (0.9%); this is highest in Birmingham at 1.2%.

Homelessness

Rough sleepers are a particularly vulnerable group and are unable in the ordinary course of events to self-isolate. Where someone's home is not a place of safety, or when they do not have ready access to essentials such as food and medicine, being more isolated may place them at greater risk of harm.

Figure 2 shows rates of households assessed as homeless or in temporary accommodation in the WMCA and constituent authorities. The WMCA has 3.46* homeless households per 100,000 households which is significantly higher than the national average (1.49) and WM Region (1.72); Dudley has the highest rate of 3 per 100,000 households. The WMCA has 3.34* households in temporary accommodation per 100,000 households and 77.4% of these households are with children. This is just less than national average (3.74) but greater than WM Region (1.91). Birmingham has the highest rate of 6.7 per 100,000 households and 81.7% of these households are with children, followed by Coventry (4.01 per 100,000 households and 56.9% with children).

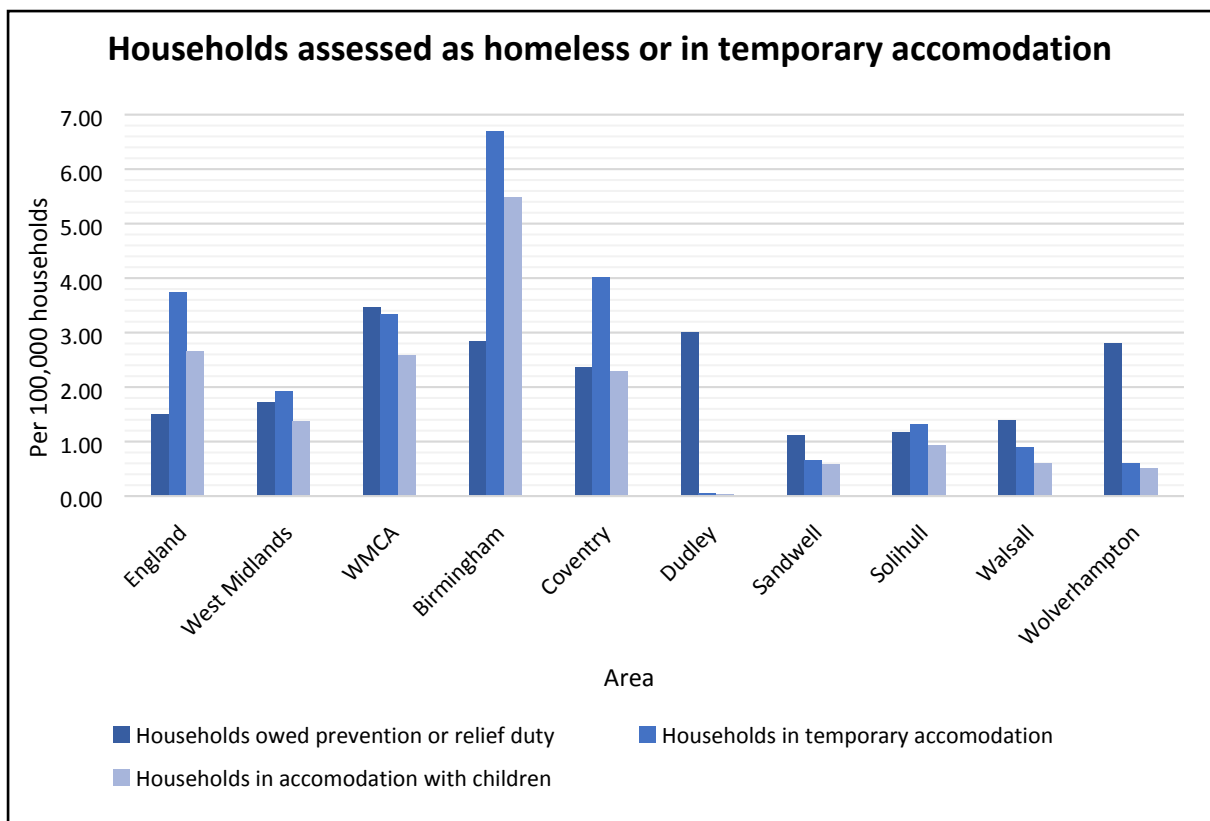**Please interpret with caution, this statistic is aggregated from the 7 met local authorities within WMCA.*

Households assessed as homeless or in temporary accomodation

Figure 2

Drug or alcohol use

People who misuse or are dependent on drugs and alcohol may be at increased risk of becoming infected, and infecting others, with coronavirus (COVID-19). They may also be more vulnerable to the impact of infection with the virus, due to underlying conditions. There is an estimated 0.8% of WMCA population in treatment at drug or alcohol misuse services which is higher than WM Region (0.66%). Solihull has the greatest estimated proportion within this population group at 0.91% in WMCA area, followed by Birmingham (0.85%) and Walsall (0.81%).

Looked after children

The WM Region has a total of 82 per 100,000 children looked after by local authority which is greater than national average (65). Sandwell has the greatest amount of looked after children with 109, followed by Wolverhampton (102 per 100,000 children).

Data Sources

Key and vulnerable sector jobs: Business Register and Employment Survey, 2018

Older age groups: Office of National Statistics, 2018

Mental health conditions: Quality Outcomes Framework, 2017/18

Homelessness: Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, Sep 2019

Drug or alcohol use: National Drug Monitoring System, 2017/18

Looked after children: Department for Education March, 2019