

# Too much pressure!

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*look at young people and the COVID-19 pandemic in context*

The early decades of the 21st century were unpropitious times to be young. Implementation of UK government austerity policies drastically reduced opportunities and support for children and young people. The labour market offered short term and zero-hour contracts for low-paid and low-skilled work, long-term wage stagnation and rising unemployment. Combined with prohibitive material barriers in the housing market and with a drastically reduced welfare state, young adults often faced rising levels of insecurity, deprivation and poverty, sometimes even when they were in work. Building a future meant facing multiple marginalising forces.

The legacy of pre-pandemic austerity combined with the impact of the COVID-19 crisis has further exacerbated inequalities but all young people were affected by the impacts of lockdown, not just the most disadvantaged. Normal educational and labour market pathways were disrupted but, of course, some faced more disruption and disadvantage than others. Lockdown restrictions saw children and young people restricted to home, with curtailed social interactions and diluted contact with services and organisations, such as schools and youth services. During this time youth workers regularly reported new cases of neglect as safeguarding risks heightened (British Academy, 2021) witnessing 'a silent pandemic' (BMJ, 2020) of child abuse during lockdown.

The pandemic was accompanied by a range of professional, political, scientific and media 'expert' commentaries. These tended to reflect age-old, dominant ideologies of youth: powerless victims defined by disrupted education or villainous 'super spreaders' accused of partying in university halls or wrongful attendance at Black Lives Matter protests.

## The research

Motivated by the 'structured absence' of young people's views, our research was rooted in critical youth studies and conducted with young people and

youth work practitioners from the North East of England (see MacDonald et al., 2023). Nearly one thousand 15 to 30 year olds took part in an on-line survey that was coterminous with the onset of the pandemic and lockdowns, and around thirty of them took part in follow-up interviews in the subsequent months. Because participation was voluntary and open to all, we cannot claim the sample was statistically representative but we did achieve a good mix of young people by gender, social class, ethnicity, and locality. The research examined the sociological implications of the COVID-19 crisis for young people through their opinions and experience. For us, it was important to locate young people's experiences of 'the here and now' of the pandemic within a longer perspective on the changing situation of youth in the UK. Next we identify some key findings.

## Relationships

Recognising an inter-generational inequality of lockdown policy, young people were more often than older people forced by law to be separate from romantic partners and were cut off from the important, informal social life significant to the youth phase. The pandemic and lockdown(s) impacted heavily on young people's day-to-day lives and their relationships with family, friends and partners. For some, relationships improved and new hobbies were fostered, whilst others reported increased pressure and household strain, often connected to lack of space. Comments expressed a widespread sense of loss, as young people missed friends and partners amid a sense of floundering; filling and structuring time in endless 'Netflix Days' became challenging. Sleep patterns were disrupted and life became disorienting.

The pandemic's negative impact on young people's mental health emerged as the largest single theme in our survey with participants talking about increased 'anxiety', 'stress', 'depression' and 'worry' and a greater propensity to 'feel low', or to have

'panic attacks' or 'negative thoughts'. Participants linked anxiety to disrupted social rites of passage or 'cultural milestones' such as graduation 'proms'. Simultaneously, youth workers reported a crisis in youth mental health, finding it difficult to operate effectively and worrying about the growing number of young people invisible to services or 'only just getting by'.

The pandemic magnified the effects of social class and poverty. This was particularly evident vis-a-vis education. 'The digital divide' saw many low-income families struggling to provide resources necessary for their children's learning, including competition for hardware (e.g. the family laptop), Wi-Fi bandwidth, and physical space to work in. Inequalities also reflected family cultural capital, with some participants, for instance, having no-one at home from whom they could seek help with homework.

### Employment

Young people are over-represented in the 'gig economy', employed in insecure jobs - and the pandemic added to this insecurity. Compared with older workers, young adults were more likely to lose their jobs, and for many participants in our study these jobs were lost from hospitality or retail sectors. Others were helped by the Government's furlough scheme but still worried about what the future would bring. Class inequalities played a part here too, with low-income families facing greater risk of material hardship. Middle-class families were more able to shield young people from the worst effects of the pandemic and lockdowns. Rarely discussed in youth sociology is inequality of domestic space, but this emerged as a significant finding. Bigger houses allowed a greater chance of privacy during long, lockdown days, and houses with gardens were particularly appreciated. Overcrowded homes with no outside space made for quite a different experience of lockdown. Also absent from much media commentary and research at the time - and counter to negative stories about 'irresponsible youth' - was that some young adults continued working during lockdown in crucial 'key worker' roles (e.g. as nurses, care workers, teaching assistants, delivery drivers or shop assistants).

In sum, the COVID-related recession was unusually harsh for young people because their family, social life, employment, and education were simultaneously disrupted, amounting to a widespread sense of uncertainty *and*, for many, psychological ill-being.

### Young people, youth transitions: before, now and in store

Our research recognises the crises young people were already facing by the end of the first two decades of the 21st century - poverty and deprivation, austerity-driven cuts to services and welfare entitlements, underemployment and widespread job insecurity, the costs and diminishing returns of university, the 'impossibility' of the housing market, falling social mobility - arguing that the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown restrictions and policy impact have further exacerbated their position by making transitions to adulthood even more precarious. Thus uncertainty and insecurity were pre-existing facets of the youth condition in the UK, further exacerbated by the pandemic. Those in their mid to late twenties will have faced the double misfortune of the post-global financial crash 2008 recession *and* the COVID-19 recession.

Economists have long understood that young people making transitions to adulthood during times of economic crisis not only face immediate pressures in the here and now but that this can store up problems for the long-term - greater risks of recurrent unemployment, poor quality employment, and lower earnings - in a process of socio-economic 'scarring'. Arguably, the prospect of long-term scarring is particularly significant for this generation, one that has faced unprecedented disruption to educational and labour market progress, coupled with significant social and psychological distress. Looking at evidence from four OECD countries, Palmer and Small (2021) suggest the pandemic has 'amplified economic instability and health risks' for socio-economically marginalised young people.

The pandemic has highlighted inequalities between generations and also inequalities within youth. We already knew that young people as a whole were facing stagnant prospects for upward social mobility, with inter-generational progress 'grinding to a halt' (Williams et al., 2021: 1). The enormous social and economic effects of the pandemic have been particularly hard for those young people who *already* carry social class disadvantage, such as lower levels of education, qualifications, lower individual and family income and wealth, poorer quality housing, fewer material resources in the home, less living space and privacy, and so on.

Overall, it has been difficult to plot the course of the pandemic and to know its multiple and changing social, economic and health effects. The end of 2021 saw the UK with a strong economic recovery, record

levels of job vacancies and falling youth unemployment (ONS, 2021b). In contrast, summer 2023 sees high inflation and a so-called 'cost of living crisis', making the dynamics and uncertainties between youth unemployment, education, and employment even more unpredictable. For instance, it seems that - counter to expectation - the pandemic did *not* dramatically increase the proportions of young people classed as 'NEET', partly because of better than expected economic recovery but also because relatively fewer young people were in the labour market (with more young people 'seeking refuge' in post-18 education and some 'disappearing' into 'economic inactivity').

### Conclusion

In the latter days of the pandemic there was a lot of talk - from politicians as well as the general public - about 'getting back to normal'. For young people and young adults this would mean returning them to a situation of limited opportunities, stagnant social mobility, an insecure labour market and an 'impossible' housing market. Young people in the early years of the twenty-first century have not had the opportunity to establish the sort of 'normal' transitions to adulthood enjoyed, in earlier decades, by the older generation. For them, their normality has been one of flux, uncertainty and disappearing opportunity.

One conclusion from our research was that making accurate predictions about the dynamics of the youth labour market post-pandemic was an enterprise likely to fail. All that seems clear is that uncertainty and precarity have become more deeply entrenched and that old inequalities have been reaffirmed (and new ones have become apparent, as with the garden 'haves and have nots'). We do not yet know the complete shape, dimensions, dynamics and experience of the intersection of youth inequalities and youth outcomes, nor - critically - how they might map onto the longer-term social welfare of young people in the UK.

We are sure, however, that if we are to properly understand the impact of the pandemic on young people we need to situate accounts of 'here and now' (in terms of the pressures on relationships, education, employment, mental health) in a longer-term sociological and historical perspective that looks *backwards*, pre-pandemic, and that looks *forward* to the likely futures faced by young people who have lived through the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns.

We are also confident that there is a strong case for urgent social policy action directed towards ameliorating some of the immediate effects of the pandemic (e.g. in relation to the apparent crisis in youth mental health) and towards resolving some of the longer-lasting problems young people face in transition to adulthood (ones that have been exacerbated by the pandemic and are likely to be worsened by future 'scarring effects'). Foci here could be on reinvestment in youth work and related services, on programmes of education and training linked to secure and lasting employment, as well as actions to resolve the crisis in young adults' housing transitions. Overall, we suggest, a programme *to promote and safeguard the social welfare of young people* - based on lively research consultation and engagement with young people themselves.

### References

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