

Generation COVID-19

Building the case to protect young people's
future health

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Key points

- Emerging evidence on the economic and social impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic shows that young people aged 12–24 years are one of the worst-affected groups, particularly in terms of the labour market and mental health outcomes.
- Our analysis has found an increased reason for concern across a range of measures. These include young people’s self-reported emotional state (Figure 1) where following the lockdown there is a doubling of the proportion of young people not able to concentrate and a tripling of those not able to enjoy day-to-day activities. Our analysis also shows that one in ten lack private space in their home to work or study (Figure 2).
- Our analysis also shows that the effect is not equal for all young people. Young people in the north of England, and young people from poorer households have been more likely to lose work. Young people from a minority ethnic background are more than twice as likely to be no longer working since lockdown than their peers, with 12.8% reporting to have lost their jobs.
- As the government looks to ‘build back better’, creating a national cross-government strategy on health inequalities becomes more important than ever and it is vital that young people are placed at the heart of this plan.

Introduction

The COVID-19 lockdown has required many people to come to terms with a vastly different way of life, while also grappling with the suffering created by the pandemic and its subsequent economic crisis. As a result of necessary measures to protect health in the short term, young people in particular are now experiencing ongoing economic and social challenges that threaten their long-term health and wellbeing.

Our [Young people's future health inquiry](#), found the age between 12 and 24 years to be a crucial time for young people as they build the foundations for a healthy adulthood. Making a successful transition to adulthood depends in large part on access to good-quality work, housing and strong relationships. However, to secure these, young people need financial, practical and emotional support, along with skills and the right connections. Research has also shown that experiencing social and economic disadvantage during at this age [has biological consequences](#), which can lead to poorer health outcomes in the long run.

As policymakers look towards a recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, young people's long-term health needs to be at the heart of their decision making. It is essential that the government prioritises policies that take account of the complex and intersecting nature of the issues facing young people, many of which pre-date the pandemic and have been brought into sharp focus by the crisis.

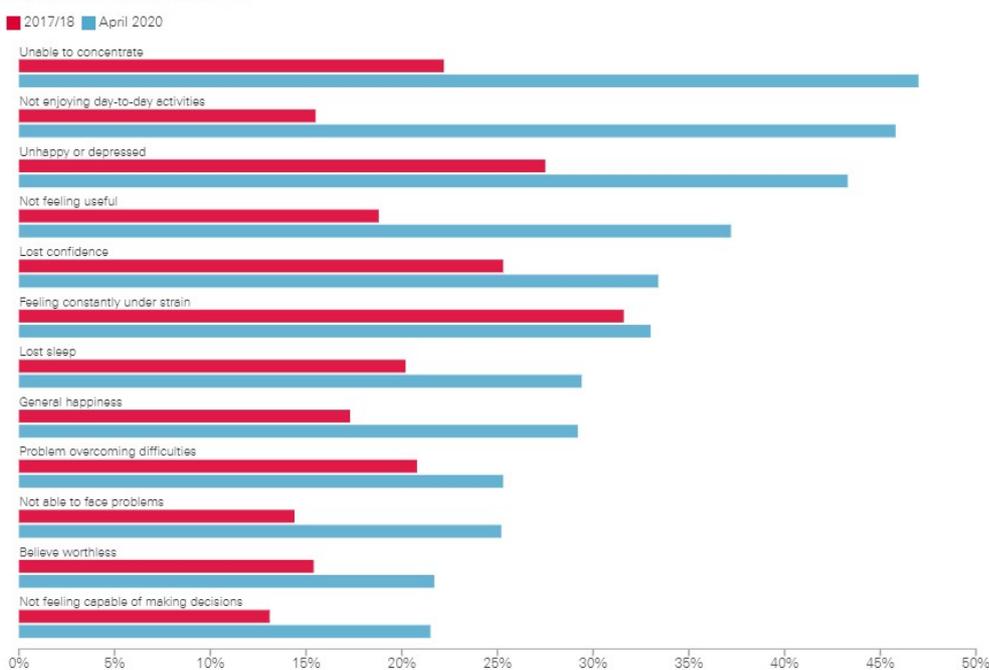
The impact of the pandemic on young people’s health and wellbeing

Data shows that young people’s mental health has worsened substantially during the pandemic. The Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) that has been monitoring the social impact of COVID-19 has found that young people are more likely than other age groups to report that lockdown has made their mental health worse. Young people’s wellbeing was already a concern in the UK before COVID-19, with a rise in the proportion of young people reporting symptoms of anxiety and depression increasing from 18% in 2009/10 to 21% in 2013/14.

‘I definitely feel my emotional wellbeing has been affected by lockdown. When you’re sitting in the house and there’s nothing to do you get really bored, and you kind of feel down. You just want to get out, see your friends and have that laugh.’ (Brooke)

Young people have experienced an increase in negative feelings across a range of areas. Figure 1 compares Understanding Society data from 2017/18 and April 2020 and shows that young people are three times more likely to report that they were not enjoying day-to-day activities in April 2020 than they were in 2017/18. There is also a significant increase in the number of young people reporting an inability to concentrate, with a rise from 22% in 2017/18 to 47% in April 2020.

Figure 1: More young people have experienced negative feelings during lockdown
Proportion of 18–24-year-olds experiencing negative feelings about different measures, by year or month of year: UK, 2017/18 and April 2020



The Health Foundation © 2020 Source: Health Foundation analysis of UK Household Longitudinal Study, Understanding Society COVID-19 Study, April 2020, and Wave 8, 2017/18

Loneliness during lockdown was a particular challenge for young people. The University College London (UCL) COVID-19 study found that loneliness levels were particularly high for young adults in the [first month of lockdown](#), which is similar to trends [before lockdown](#). Analysis from the [Association for Young People's Health](#) found that 10% of young people aged between 10 and 24 are often lonely, and this decreased with an increase in age.

'But if I'm feeling down, I don't really know what to do. I can't go out, I can't see anyone. I'm sick and tired of FaceTiming everyone too. I sometimes get self-critical when I'm by myself.' (Maria)

Young people will need support for the short-term impact of COVID-19 on their wellbeing to avoid long-term effects. Mental health services have become extremely stretched during lockdown and, as a result, more people have been struggling to access the help they need. [Mind](#) reported that in April 2020, one in four young people were unable to access the mental health support they sought.

'Getting the mental health support I need has been a real struggle. A lot of the mental health services I was using before either discharged me or just haven't been in contact. I've been getting that regular support for years now, so it's really hard to adapt and find my own coping mechanisms.' (Evie)

Housing

A safe and secure home environment is an essential building block for a healthy future. [Housing](#) is not an isolated element of young people's lives. Where someone lives affects the jobs they can access and their relationships with family, friends and their wider community. Lack of space and overcrowding is a health issue. The [recent Marmot review](#) found that children living in overcrowded homes experience worse health outcomes. [Recent Health Foundation analysis](#) shows that overcrowding mostly affects those on low incomes. Lockdown quickly highlighted the importance of both indoor and outdoor space as people were required to spend most of their time at home.

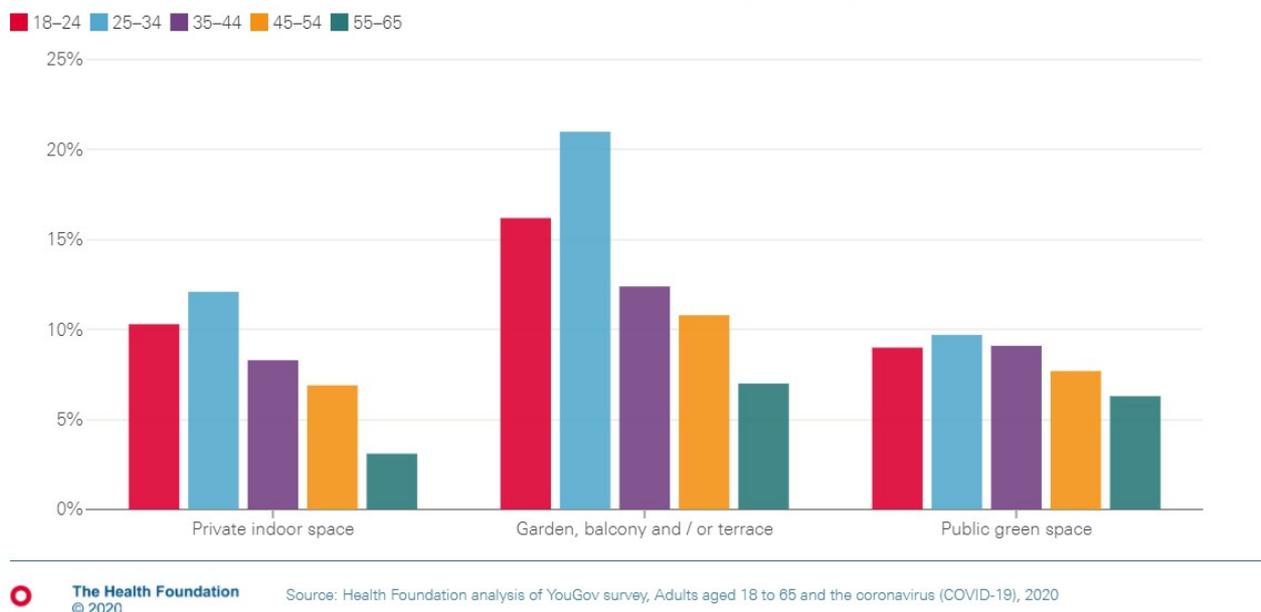
Having enough access to private and quiet spaces was a concern raised by young people. Without this, it was difficult to concentrate on studies or work, be able to socialise with friends or even access remote support, such as medical appointments or youth services. In turn, this can impact physical and mental health.

'I live with my mum, dad and two brothers... space can be quite restricted. My room is the only space I've got to myself, and I have to move my bed to make enough space to work.' (John)

Analysis of YouGov data, outlined in Figure 2, found that younger people were less likely to report that they had access to adequate space. Space has increased in importance since lockdown, with issues ranging from overcrowding and lack of green space. 10% of young people were living in households with either insufficient desk space or a quiet table space to work at which would

negatively affect their education or work during this time as well as having a decreased sense of privacy.

Figure 2: Younger people are less likely have access to space during lockdown
Proportion of people without access to different types of space, by age: UK, 2020



In 2017/18, there were [537,000 young people](#) aged 16–24 years living in the private rental sector in England, which accounts for 68% of all independent households in the age group. The [Chartered Institute of Housing](#) has highlighted that young people often face high rental costs and insecure finances, which can negatively impact wellbeing and mental health. As the furlough scheme winds down, young renters will be more vulnerable to evictions, with [research showing that](#) 24% of private renters aged 16–24 years are reliant on the furlough scheme.

‘I barely have enough money to pay my rent. It’s like a panic – and I’ve got all this time to sit and think about it.’ (Unnamed young person)

Work

Employment and its associated economic benefits is another important building block of a healthy life. High-quality, meaningful work gives many young people a sense of stability, purpose and improved self-esteem. [Longitudinal data from UCL](#) found that unemployed young people are more than twice as likely to suffer from mental health disorders compared to those with jobs. Youth unemployment can have significant long-term effects, with periods of unemployment scarring future employability and wages.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an economic downturn and a subsequent shock to the job market. The furlough scheme buffered the immediate effects of the economic crisis and was a lifeline for organisations that needed financial support. It is, however, a short-term measure.

Recent analysis by the Resolution Foundation and the Health Foundation found that [one-third of 18–24-year-olds have been furloughed or lost their job](#), in contrast to just over one-sixth of working-age adults overall. Concerningly, further analysis by [the Resolution Foundation](#) suggests that those currently on furlough have an elevated risk of later unemployment when the job retention scheme ends.

'I had literally just started my new job after Christmas – and then this happened. I was working 21 hours a week at the local pub, five minutes from where I live. It was going well.' (Bethan)

Drawing on Understanding Society data, the graphs comprising Figure 3 illustrate how some groups of young people have been more affected by the economic crisis than others. Figure 3a shows that young people with the lowest household income were the most likely to have lost employment or have had their hours cut at 8%. In contrast, the opposite pattern is displayed for proportion of young people furloughed indicating that young people from households receiving the smallest incomes are more likely to have taken a decrease in income during this time.

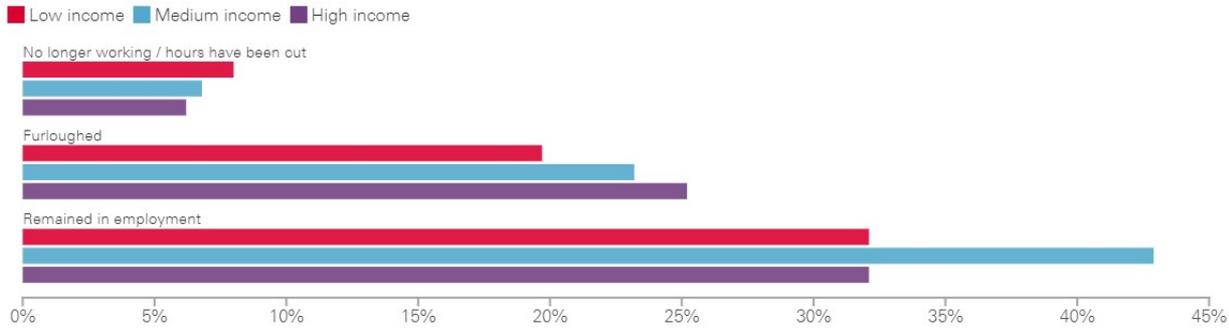
Figure 3b shows that young people from a minority ethnic background are twice as likely to be no longer working or had hours cut since lockdown than their peers at 13.9%. Previous research from the [Institute for Employment Studies](#) highlights how black and minority ethnic young people already suffer significant labour market disadvantage and are less likely to be in employment compared to others in their age group.

These charts provide an early indication of how the economic recession will affect young people's job prospects and the growing inequalities in the labour market. Groups of young people already experiencing disadvantage seem to be most affected, so policymakers will need to ensure that any policy response does not further widen disparities.

Some groups of young people have been more affected by the economic crisis than others during the lockdown. Scroll through to see effects by different measures. 1/2 < >

Figure 3a: Young people from households with low income are more likely to have lost their job or had their hours cut during lockdown

Proportion of 18–24-year-olds experiencing employment changes during lockdown, by household income: UK, 2017/18 and April 2020

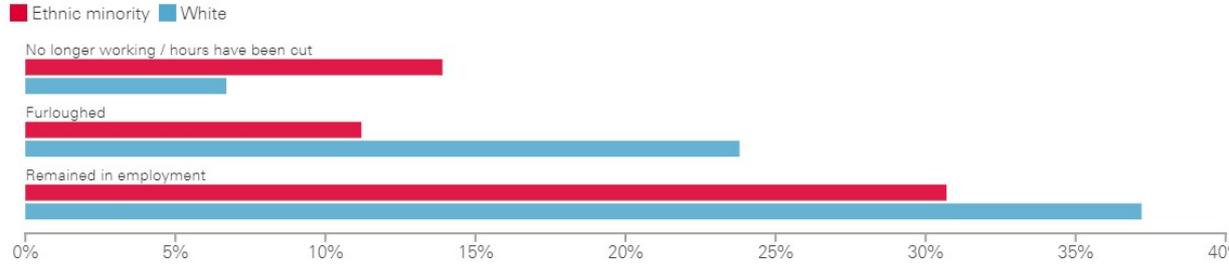


The Health Foundation © 2020 Source: Health Foundation analysis of UK Household Longitudinal Study, Understanding Society COVID-19 Study, April 2020, and Wave 9 2017/18 • Note: Low, middle and high income refers to relative household income within group with the 'Low income' group reflecting those in the bottom third of household income

Some groups of young people have been more affected by the economic crisis than others during the lockdown. Scroll through to see effects by different measures. 2/2 < >

Figure 3b: Young people from ethnic minority backgrounds are twice as likely to have lost their job during lockdown

Proportion of 18–24-year-olds experiencing employment changes during lockdown, by ethnicity: UK, 2020



The Health Foundation © 2020 Source: Health Foundation analysis of UK Household Longitudinal Study, Understanding Society COVID-19 Study, April 2020

Against this backdrop, young people describe feeling pessimistic about their future job prospects. Analysis of the YouGov Survey shows a total of 40% of 18–24-year-olds are expecting their hours to be reduced in the future compared with 25% of those aged 25 years and older. They are also the age group most likely to believe that they will be furloughed or lose their job sometime in the future due to the economic effects of COVID-19.

'I'm worried the pandemic will impact my job prospects. With fewer nurseries open, they don't need as many staff. It's disappointing, because when my course finishes in June I'll either have to take whatever work I can find or sign on, until the childcare jobs come back.' (Codie)

Relationships

The period between 12 and 24 years is a critical time for creating and maintaining relationships with family, friends and the wider community. Interacting with the wider world helps young people to strengthen social and emotional skills during this critical developmental time. [New research](#) suggests that the lack of social contact due to lockdown may be impacting on young people's development and their ability to develop important social and emotional skills.

Lockdown meant that many young people spent most of their time with their families rather than their wider social circle in educational settings. Some young people illustrated how this had brought families closer together as they were more reliant on each other for support.

'It's so nice to be able to spend some quality time with my parents. We've all got such busy schedules that we usually can't... we're cooking together, watching films over the weekend – we haven't done that for 4 or 5 years.' (Samya)

However, spending more time with family can be challenging for some young people – particularly if they feel unsafe or unwelcome.

Lockdown has significantly impacted on young people's wider relationships, with [recent ONS data](#) showing that 60% of young people aged 16–29 years felt concerned about the impact of lockdown on their friendships, compared to just 34% of 30–59-year-olds. Technology has played an important role in keeping in touch with friends, with adults aged 18–29 years [speaking to others by telephone or video calls and messages](#) more than any other age group. However, 40% of 18–24-year-olds have reported speaking less to family and friends outside their house than they did before lockdown, according to YouGov data. Many young people explained that technology could not replace face-to-face interactions with friends.

'I'm dyslexic, so I actually much prefer communicating face-to-face. I keep up with friends using video calls at the weekend, but I miss seeing them in person. I hate texting – sometimes it's hard to get the words out.' (Codie)

At the start of lockdown, communities came together as neighbours offered to help each other with errands and emotional support. Some young people who were interviewed shared stories of helping elderly neighbours with food shopping or helping working family members with childcare responsibilities. However, others felt disconnected from their community, particularly if they practised a faith. There was a real sense of loss in their connection to religion, especially when they were unable to celebrate important festivals.

'Ramadan is supposed to bring families together, and you just can't get that same feeling over the phone or on FaceTime... We also can't go to the mosque – that's a really big deal... But going there at night to pray is so important at this time. It's a big loss.' (Maria)

Looking to the future

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to fundamental changes in how we live, work and socialise. Some of these changes have been exceptionally difficult for young people, such as feeling lonely and isolated, or worries about income and work. For young people, there is great uncertainty about the future of society and their role in it. [UCL's COVID-19 social study](#) reports that three-quarters of young adults (18–29-year-olds) feel worried about future plans. In comparison just under half of 30–59-year-olds and a quarter of adults aged 60 years and older felt worried. With the crisis in the job market still unfolding, it is difficult for young people to feel optimistic about future work prospects:

'It's difficult to think about the future right now. There's a lot of uncertainty about where I'll find work in the near future. I'd rather focus on making the most of the time at home right now.' (Katy)

The young people we interviewed are not alone in feeling worried about whether or not they will be able to find work after lockdown. YouGov data found that the younger age groups have the highest expectations of being furloughed and losing their jobs, with 58% believing it will be difficult to find a new job in the future.

There are, however, some reasons to be optimistic about the future. The [OPN survey](#) found that 16–29-year-olds are more likely than older age groups to think they would be able to save money over the next 12 months and are also more likely to think that the financial situation in their household will improve over the next 12 months. Over half (55%) expect life to return to normal in the next 6 months.

Some of the young people have also experienced unexpected, positive changes to their day-to-day lives as a result of lockdown. Lockdown offered some respite to young people who were living a hectic life, especially where the young people had been juggling study, work and a busy social life.

'Let's be honest, before lockdown everyone was run down. I hope that people come out of this a lot more appreciative of the people around them, and of life. That people can have fun without stressing about it, and just enjoy the beauty of life every day.' (Huma)

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has [brought existing inequalities into sharp focus](#) and young people face new challenges. As this analysis shows, these touch on many different areas of their lives, from emotional wellbeing to their housing, work and relationships and will affect their transition into adulthood. While the economic impact of the crisis is a significant concern that cannot be overlooked, so too are the potential effects on this generation's future health and wellbeing.

Securing the foundations for young people's healthy future will require focused and comprehensive action across the range of factors that influence long term health. As part of the Young people's future health inquiry, nine expert partner organisations have made [policy recommendations](#) on how to put young people's needs at the centre of government policy making. These set out a blueprint for fixing pre-existing issues for young people, which in the light of the pandemic become paramount.

Decision makers will need to prioritise action in the following areas:

- There [needs to be fundamental changes](#) to housing policy to enable all young people to exercise choice and control over their housing situation. This includes providing realistic help with rental housing costs for the young people who need it through the benefits system such as removing the 5-week wait for universal credit, maintaining the local housing allowance to a level that enables people to afford housing within the cheapest 30% in the local area, and abolishing the shared accommodation rate. Housing security and quality needs to improve through abolishing 'no fault' evictions across all of the UK and developing a single set of minimum standards for landlords
- [Preventing short-term losses in income will be critical if risks to future health](#) are to be minimised. The government has already introduced policies that incentivise job creation, such as the Kickstart scheme, announced on the 8 July 2020, by [the Chancellor](#). It is hoped that these measures will create short-term job opportunities and minimise the scarring effect of unemployment for young people. The measures have been widely welcomed as a first step, However, to bring lasting benefits to young people these need to look beyond employment as the primary success measure and monitor [the availability of high quality work](#). Training offers will be needed to help young people find and stay in high-quality work. Without action, the potential loss of job opportunities for young people could drive widening health inequalities.
- The pandemic has fractured young people's opportunities to build vital personal connections within their local communities, from schools and colleges to community and faith-based organisations. These communities offered young people the opportunity to connect with people who might offer support, as well as helping young people develop their emotional and social skills. As lockdown gradually eases and public spaces begin to

reopen, it is important to secure opportunities for young people to build relationships with others outside their own family. One potential area for action is to boost funding to youth services, which have taken a significant hit during the pandemic with [an estimated one in five youth centres](#) not expected to reopen after lockdown.

- The impact of the disruption to young people’s education during the pandemic could be severe without remedial action to support attainment and personal development. As young people return to schools and colleges there needs to be more actively monitoring young people’s wellbeing in educational settings.

As the government looks to ‘build back better’ a national cross-government health inequalities strategy is needed to level up health outcomes and improve the population’s health and wellbeing. This needs to be driven forward and supported by strong system leadership across the various levels of government and embedded within local and national recovery plans. As part of this strategy, a focus on supporting young people to recover and thrive – irrespective of their background – will be vital.

About this long read

This long read draws on insights from the Health Foundation’s young people’s advisory group and features original analysis of YouGov and Understanding Society survey data conducted by the Health Foundation. The YouGov survey was designed and commissioned by the Resolution Foundation in partnership with the Health Foundation and was collected between 6 and 11 May 2020. The views in this analysis are not necessarily those of the Resolution Foundation. It was conducted using an online interview administered to members of the YouGov Plc UK panel, made up of over 800,000 individuals who have agreed to take part. The total sample size was 6,005 adults, aged 18–65. Figures relating to the proportion of those experiencing no access to space, expectations of future, frequency of speaking to someone outside the household and ease of finding a new job have been analysed independently of YouGov by the Health Foundation and are not the views of YouGov.