

Introduction to Special Issue. Distancing, Disease and Distress: The Young and COVID-19: Exploring Young People's Experience of Inequalities and Their Resourcefulness During the Pandemic

YOUNG
29(4S) 5S–10S, 2021
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YOUNG Editorial Group



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DOI: 10.1177/11033088211032792
journals.sagepub.com/home/you



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The COVID-19 global pandemic has impacted everyone's lives—young and old. When the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic on 11 March 2020 and one country after another went into lockdown, we as editors of YOUNG and youth researchers living in five different countries naturally started to think about and reflect on what impact the pandemic would have on young people's everyday lives, their well-being and futures across different national settings. There were clear similarities in the initial response of governments throughout the world to the COVID-19 outbreak, and most countries introduced, for example, social distancing, and the closing of schools, organized leisure activities and public places such as shops, restaurants and bars. However, it was uncertain how long these governmental measures would last and, thus, how they would influence young people's lives immediately and into the future. In response to this uncertainty and in the interest of capturing young people's experiences, we as editors called for this special issue to focus on young people and COVID-19, exploring their changed everyday lives and how they adapted to the global pandemic. By the end of the call,

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1 December 2020, we had, to our delight and amazement, received almost 100 submissions from youth researchers from all over the world, covering a wide range of topics. It is, thus, with great pleasure that we are introducing this special issue. To accommodate the immense interest and the high quality of many of the submissions, this special issue of YOUNG is designed as a double issue with 11 articles focused on how young people experienced and responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Across the world, we see similarities in how young people are responding to the biggest human, economic and social crisis in 75 years and how it is influencing young people's future lives, locally, nationally and globally (Roberts, 2020). We see new forms of being together, particularly online—of responding to the pandemic and in enacting youth life, as the closure of public spaces has cut off usual opportunities for young people to engage with each other and move through the milestones and experiences that ordinarily denote this period of the life-course. However, we also find that, in many countries, young people have suffered financially from the crisis, they are often in the most precarious employment and the first to lose their jobs. A large proportion of young people are employed in the 'gig economy', including the service sector, hospitality and tourism industries. Consequently, they have been affected disproportionately by the quarantine economy, often in jobs where they are less likely to work from home and/or on precarious contracts and less likely to be eligible for wage support, like furlough schemes.

Although the wider economic and social impact on young people's education and job opportunities are yet to be seen, we know from previous global crises that young people are more likely to be hit hard, particularly those on the margins of society (Jones, 2020). The impact of COVID-19 has compounded young people's feelings of exclusion, through control measures and restrictions on leisure (in the night-time economy), the arts and sport, with increased surveillance over youth activities via policing of unstructured leisure, which has promoted the image that young people require punitive actions. For Cohen (2020, p. 28), the politics of COVID-19 'replays a divisive generation game', where the odds are stacked against young people, who are the first to be made redundant, insecure within the housing market and confronting future educational opportunities without normal resources (Godwin, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has not been an 'equal' pandemic (Bambra et al., 2021). The pandemic has killed unequally, been experienced and responded to unequally and will impact into the future unequally. It has been experienced unequally between and within countries, exacerbating age-old inequalities and generating new ones (Robinson et al., 2021). While the actual spread of the virus and COVID-19-related deaths have impacted nations differently, there have also been significant differences in how governments have responded and the restrictions they have imposed on their populations. Thus young people's lives and behaviours have been impacted differently across nations. Similarly, the willingness and ability of governments to provide financial and other forms of support to young people have created new forms of global inequality. Across the globe, hundreds of millions of young people's lives are on hold because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) states that '90% of young people have reported increased mental anxiety' and 'more than one billion students in almost every country have been impacted by school closures; 80% of young women are worried about their future; and one in six young people worldwide have lost their jobs during the pandemic'.

While age-old discourses about young people ‘as trouble’ or ‘in trouble’ have played out across the media, they have been accompanied by new tensions. Young people have been simultaneously accused of being irresponsible virus superspreaders at the same time as being relied upon to engage in a range of frontline positions in tackling the pandemic (often in precarious industries). For example, the public debates in the UK have been shaped by two key factors—health and the economy. The British tabloid media (Payman 2020 Aug 8) gleefully reported the UK Government’s Health Secretary, Matt Hancock, advising young people “‘Don’t kill your gran”, urging them to stop flouting COVID-19 restrictions and to stick to social distancing because COVID-19 infections are surging among “affluent” 17 to 21-year-olds’. This advice was given within a government policy context promoting an ‘Eat Out to Help Out’ scheme, subsidising dining to kick-start the hospitality economy and clear guidance to students to return to university and face-to-face teaching! The apparent low susceptibility of catching COVID-19 and then spreading the virus have enabled the UK media and government to replay the image of young people as described by Cohen (1972/1980) as insensitive and irrational ‘folk devils’ ripe for vilification and stigma. Without empirical evidence, this public accusation against young people sets them up as a danger and in opposition to parents, older people and government.

These tensions also feed into debates about generational divides, with older people being most impacted through health risks associated with COVID-19 and young people expected to bear the brunt of future social and economic consequences. While the short-term impacts of COVID-19 might create divisions along generational lines, the long-term consequences are more likely to divide society along well-known, and new forms of, inequality. In countries like the USA or the UK, where the protective carapace of the welfare state no longer (if ever) promises a basic level of income or healthcare, the societal impact of COVID-19 has been more critical, compared to the Nordic countries, where the Nordic model, despite differences in degree of lockdown, seems, so far, better equipped to handle the crisis. For example, in Norway, young people have continued to have a high level of life satisfaction with the majority identifying ways the pandemic has impacted positively upon their lives (Bakken, 2021). Even though many countries responded with striking degrees of commonality in government measures in the first few months of the pandemic, we have in the year that has followed seen large differences in government responses, and, thus, young people have been impacted differently in relation to closure, containment, health and economic support. Thus, in some countries, school-closing and stay-at-home measures have lasted for many months, while other countries, such as, for instance, Denmark, Norway and Holland were quick to open schools (and day care) for the youngest. The intensity of closure and containment policies has not only been experienced differently across nations but also across and within each generation. The recent pledges of the G7 countries at the recent 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) on climate, aid and vaccinations branded a ‘colossal failure’ demonstrate that international inequalities look set to continue (M. Lawson quoted in Woodcock & Merrick, 2021).

The COVID-19 crisis has created new benchmarks for what is meaningful, with self-isolating and the practising of social distancing interrupting the temporality and rhythm of everyday life. Currently, we do not know how profound and long term these changes will be in terms of economic, cultural, social and ontological security.

The complexities of extended and non-linear youth transitions have been long documented within Youth Studies and, indeed, this journal. There is much we can learn from this rich scholarly history to help make sense of young people's pandemic experiences and to tentatively predict what the forthcoming pressures may be on young people and how governments might aid or hinder their transitions in the future. Youth have an important role to play in making sense of the COVID-19 pandemic in young people's lives. We know that studying the 'empirical realities of young people's transitions to adulthood can reveal wider social change and continuity', but MacDonald and King (2021, p. 4) also argue that 'by studying youth we can see how powerful social forces construct narratives and policies about "youth" that then serve the interests of the powerful'. In an era of fake news and misinformation, examining the response of governments around the world to their youngest citizens will be an important task for us all. This special issue of YOUNG will capture some of these processes as it documents how young people in a number of different countries have experienced this historical moment and how it is impacting upon their lives now and into the future. While we have endeavoured to curate a double special issue, which sheds light on young people's varied experiences across the world, we are cognizant that the articles included largely originate from Global Minority countries. As such, although there will be striking international similarities in some experiences, they are unlikely to speak to the experiences of all young people. Nevertheless, they offer important insights for the global Youth Studies community and beyond.

Outline of This Special Issue on Young People and COVID-19

This first special issue of the journal YOUNG incorporates six articles and explores young people's experiences of inequalities and their resourcefulness during the pandemic. A key theme running through the articles in this issue is the way that youth transitions have been impacted through the pandemic, for example, through education and work. The second special issue includes another five articles, which will be presented accordingly. Together, the two special issues represent young people's voices from Australia, Ireland, England, Portugal, Canada, Italy, Finland, Denmark and Norway. Young people's experiences of the lockdown have varied not only across national settings but also among young people in different circumstances and life situations.

The article by Christina McMellon and A. MacLachlan titled: 'Young People's Rights and Mental Health During a Pandemic' is an analysis of the impact of emergency legislation in Scotland. It looks at emerging evidence related to the COVID-19 pandemic and government measures questioning whether these policy changes have had a detrimental impact on young people's mental health. The article takes human rights-based approach to the pandemic, where the main issues were identified around young people's rights to access mental health services and information, participation in decision-making and non-discrimination of vulnerable groups. It is suggested that protection of these rights is relevant on a global basis, following similar approaches, as lockdown restrictions are eased, or where stricter local or national measures may be reintroduced to curb rising infection rates or subsequent wave(s).

The article by Paola Panerese and Vittoria Azzarita is based on data from Italy, one of the first European countries to be hit hard by the pandemic and, thus,

subsequently, enforced very strict lockdown measures. As the title ‘The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Lifestyle: How Young People have Adapted Their Leisure and Routine During Lockdown in Italy’ indicates the authors are using a quantitative survey to analyse how the initial lockdown influenced young people’s leisure life, as they, from one day to another, were stripped of any outdoor or face-to-face interactions. They argue that the strict lockdown measures in Italy created a paradox: On the one hand, young people were restricted from moving freely in public space, and on the other hand young people had never had so much time to socialize, however, only in a digital environment. This resulted in an enforced leisure, whereby leisure life also became stressful and demanding.

The article ‘Playing Apart Together: Young People’s Online Gaming During the COVID-19 Lockdown’ by Tea T. Bengtsson, Louise H. Bom and Lars Fynbo explores 35 interviews with young people, showing how gaming was something to do in a situation of nothing to do. From a practice theoretical perspective, they find that the young people’s gaming practices were beneficial (a) in allowing the young people to maintain a social life and (b) in providing a legitimate social space for maintaining friendships and/or coping with boredom. These findings demonstrate that young people engaged with online gaming were capable of adapting to fundamental changes to society due to the pandemic.

In the article “‘It’s Been a Massive Struggle’”: Exploring the Experiences of Young People Leaving Care During COVID-19’, Louise Roberts, Dawn Mannay, Alyson Rees, Hannah Bayfield, Cindy Corliss, Clive Diaz and Rachael Vaughan explore the experiences of young people from Wales leaving state care during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their analyses offer insights into the young people’s daily lives, including their routines and relationships, as well as access to resources and services. Like other of the articles in this special issue, they find stark disparity in young people’s experiences. Some of the young people felt reassured by support responses and others feeling neglected and forgotten, and the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic further hindered these young people’s already difficult transitions to adulthood.

In the article ‘Lockdown Fits and Misfits. Disabled Young People’s Lives Under COVID-19 Lockdown’, Reetta Mietola and Karoliina Ahonen show how disabled young people from Finland narrate their everyday experiences during spring 2020. Their analysis focuses on the hegemonic lockdown narratives and subject positions constructed within the unique circumstances and how these relate to the young people’s narration of disability. They highlight the variation in the narratives in relation to different experiences of (mis)fitting. While the lockdown for some has not led to changes in the experience of disability, for some young people, the lockdown has led to a deepening sense of misfitting and amplified their experience of disability.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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