The impact of COVID-19 on young people

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Abstract

This research briefing examines the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on young people and how they can be best supported by charities like People Know How. As a result of the pandemic, young people have had to deal with lockdown restrictions, adapt to remote education, online counselling services and the thought of an uncertain future. While some appear to have enjoyed spending more time with family and on hobbies, others have experienced severe changes to their mental and physical wellbeing. Vulnerable young people have suffered the most; with increased levels of anxiety and depression, a loss of safe and private spaces, and fears of falling behind in school. Furthermore, spending more time online has made young people more exposed to exploitation and peer pressure. However, social media has similarly provided a necessary means of communication with friends and family. People Know How has successfully adapted all of its services to the online environment. The briefing notes the value of People Know How listening to the voices of young people in tailoring their services to their concerns and the importance of continuing with this approach.

Keywords

Young people, mental health, COVID-19, coronavirus, education, online support

Key points

- Research has revealed a range of experiences for young people during lockdown; with some enjoying the opportunity to spend time with family and others experiencing an increase in anxiety.

- Those with pre-existing vulnerabilities have suffered the most overall and vulnerabilities have been exacerbated by health and social care services becoming overworked and struggling to adapt to social distancing restrictions.

- School closures and a lack of IT infrastructure have widened the gap between the most advantaged and the most deprived.

- Charities have much to learn from one another with regards to how service users are best supported in this new landscape

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns around the globe have temporarily altered people's ways of living, with long-lasting social and economic effects. On the 23rd March, the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced numerous restrictions that initiated a mass-scale lockdown in the United Kingdom (Prime Minister's Statement, 2020). Limitations on exercise, restrictions to restaurants and parks, bans on meeting with family and friends outside the household and new methods of working from home, have all resulted in increased difficulties in taking care of mental health. While adults have endured many hardships during the pandemic, it is young people who have been most affected (Children of the 90s, 2020). Despite this, young people have had little voice in relation to these life-altering restrictions. Young people have reportedly experienced more mental health issues as a result of the lockdown (National Youth Agency, 2020). Meanwhile, the systems that are used to support mental health issues - schools, the health system and social services - have been overwhelmed and struggling to adapt to new regulations (Turner, 2020). Moreover, with the cancellation of exams and the difficulties of home-schooling, school closures have left many young people's futures uncertain. Although some young people have adapted well to the lockdown; a large number have had trouble adjusting. In particular, the most vulnerable young people pre-lockdown have reportedly suffered the most (UK Youth, 2020). As the UK emerges from total lockdown into a socially distanced society, it is important to review how young people have dealt with this period of isolation

and what effects this may have on their mental health, as well as their social and academic progress going forward. As such, this research briefing explores the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has affected young people and presents suggestions of how they can be best supported during this time. The briefing begins by providing an overview view of how young people's wellbeing has been affected. Subsequently the impact of the lockdown on the most vulnerable will be explored, focusing on the areas of internet usage, education and young people's support services. The work of People Know How and their adapted services will be considered throughout the briefing. Other charities approaches will similarly be presented. Drawing on the knowledge from other charities is useful for People Know How to continue to improve their services and support young people's needs effectively in the gradual return to normality.

Young people's mental health in a pandemic

Although the UK lockdown began in late March, a Duke of Edinburgh Award (2020) survey conducted in April, found that 46% of the young people surveyed were worried about the effects of the pandemic on their mental health. Furthermore, a report by Girlguiding (2020) notes that girls' mental health has been negatively impacted by the pandemic, especially the age group 15-18. Particular worries concerned education uncertainty, loneliness, a lack of independence, others' health and wellbeing, and their family's financial situation (Girlguiding, 2020). Notably, the Girlguiding (2020) report similarly revealed that 61% of young people are

extremely concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on their future. Indeed, a poor post-COVID-19 economy may have disastrous effects for young people in the job market both now and in coming years (Henehan, 2020). 44% of young people also report the strain of the lack of freedom and independence that lockdown has brought (Girlguiding, 2020), which has been found to be harmful to wellbeing (The Children's Society, 2020). Although high levels of young people are adhering to restrictions (Beat Freeks Youth Trends, 2020), they have not been consulted by the Government in light of these restrictions. This is particularly problematic, considering the potential long-term consequences the actions taken can have on young people's educational attainment and future in general. Furthermore, being left out of such key decisions and being forced to follow social distance guidelines can make many young people "constantly feel like they are being told what to do" at ages when they want more independence (The Children's Society, 2020).

However, not everyone has had a negative lockdown experience. Some young people, especially younger children, have reportedly felt happy during the lockdown (Girlguiding, 2020). In particular, the respondents appreciated environmental improvements, spending more time with their families, playing or working on a hobby, less pressure from school, more online connection and more connection to the community (Girlguiding, 2020). Moreover, Healthwatch Suffolk (2020) notes that 50% of their respondents experienced no change to their wellbeing and 15% noticed an improvement. UNICEF (2020) suggests that the effects of the lockdown on some young people's wellbeing can be managed as spending more time with family as been noted as beneficial in this regard. For others, the pandemic has revealed the vulnerability of their living situation and weakened their support services (UNICEF, 2020). Therefore, it is important to remain aware of the impact of the lockdown on these young people and those who are not yet known to official services (UNICEF, 2020).

Impact on vulnerable young people

Research has revealed that young people who experienced mental health issues before COVID-19 have seen their mental health further affected during lockdown (Young Minds, 2020). Many have lost their regular coping mechanisms and have seen a reduction in support services; having been deprived of safe spaces outside the home, time socialising with friends, and pastoral support from trusted adults (UNICEF, 2020; Young Minds, 2020). Additional responsibilities, such as those for young carers, have similarly been reported to have increased exponentially and one study has linked this to a subsequent deterioration in mental health (Blake-Homes, 2020). Moreover, over one million young people have been confined in households with the 'toxic trio': addiction, poor mental health and domestic abuse (National Youth Agency, 2020). Willis Palmer (2020) suggests that because of the lockdown, children who live in these households are not being referred to the appropriate services and that there will be a spike in referrals for young people as the UK lifts restrictions. Most commonly, however, Childline has found that young

people feel 'trapped' in their homes (NSPCC Learning, 2020). This has been reported to be the case for young people with ADHD or hyperactivity conditions, who have likely found home lockdown difficult (The Children's Society, 2020).

The online impact

The Children's Society (2020) warns that children are at risk of exploitation as they spend more time online. Girlguiding (2020) reports that 85% of girls and young women have spent more time online during than before lockdown. Moreover, time online can harm mental health, with 26% of young people in Girlguiding's (2020) report feeling pressured to look a certain way and 28% feeling pressured to be productive and share on social media. However, spending more time online can have many positive effects as it has become a necessary tool for many people to stay in contact with family and friends. The internet has also been an invaluable resource for learning as many schools moved online with, for instance, the BBC creating programmes and resources for learning during lockdown. Online platforms also became a space to seek support and guidance during this time, with People Know How and other charities having moved their services online. People Know How's online befriending service provides a one-to-one online space that can show young people they are not alone and provide an opportunity to relax and play games. Arguably, this is a particularly valuable source of support for many young people at this time, as it provides them with the opportunity to build relationships with new people during lockdown. Other People Know How projects, such as Arts

Therapies and Family Support, are set to use a 'blended model' when they resume in September (People Know How, 2020). Considering the success and speed at which People Know How adapted their services to the online environment, they have proven to be a valuable supporting resource for many children and young people across Edinburgh and East Lothian during this time. Perhaps there may similarly be some value in considering some services to run partially online even after society goes back to normal, particularly the befriending service and their educational programmes.

School closures

School closures have been the greatest change in the lives of young people. UNICEF (2020) reports that ten million children are out of school in the UK and that 700 million days of schooling for all British children combined may be lost because of closures. In Scotland, the government plans to support young people's education by reopening schools in August, as well as investing in laptops for students to study at home (Scottish Government, 2020). School closures and education uncertainty rank as a high concern among young people, with many being worried about falling behind classmates (Girlguiding, 2020). Although a full reopening of schools does present potential public health risks, it can similarly be argued that it can prevent young people from falling further behind in their education and the investment in laptops could mark the first step to bridging the digital divide. People Know How have set up the Computer Delivery service, which refurbishes donated computers and laptops and delivers

these to those without computer access. Independent schemes such as this can fill the gaps left by the Scottish and other UK governments' and are decreasing the digital divide that is so important for learning.

Many young people reportedly feel anxious about returning to school and worried about catching up (Power2, 2020). Moreover, the quality of education at home has seen an opportunity gap. A report by the Sutton Trust has highlighted the disparity in teaching support and digital provision between the working class and middle class and between state and public schools (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020). Middle class children are twice as likely to take part in online lessons every day than working class children, and the figure is the same for children in public schools versus state schools (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020). This can be understood as related to UNICEF's (2020) finding that 7% of young people in the UK do not have access to fixed broadband and 2% have no access to the internet at all. Furthermore, parents with higher education qualifications generally feel more confident helping their children, in comparison to parents with A level or GCSE qualifications (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020). Therefore, the lack of access to reliable broadband and devices is one of the main reasons for the education opportunity gap – with working-class families being more likely to have poor internet access, whilst being likely to benefit most from online teaching (Cullinane and Montacute, 2020).

Furthermore, school is a primary location for children's socialisation and learning, meaning that its closure can have harmful effects on their wellbeing (The Children's Society, 2020). Additionally, school pastoral support is essential for vulnerable children with mental health and home life issues. For example, more young carers are detected in schools than in the health sector (The Children's Society, 2020). With variable communication between teachers and students during lockdown, Power2 (2020) reports that many young people have felt unsupported. People Know How have successfully adapted all their services to run online over the last few months, with a range of activities designed to help young people transition through school as well as supporting their mental health. Notably, the charity has involved young people in the decision making when adapting their services during lockdown. For example, after much consultation with young people, the P7s Transition Club was established, which provides an online space for children moving into secondary school this year to get to know one another (People Know How, 2020). This briefing has already highlighted how young people have faced most uncertainty during the pandemic and moving between schools can be especially worrying for younger children (The Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020). Therefore, providing support ahead of a potentially challenging transition during normal times is in itself valuable for many pupils, but may be even more crucial during societally uncertain times; also taking into account the disruption of their schooling caused by the pandemic.

Accessing support

Health and social care systems have been facing increasing pressures, with

face-to-face meetings being cancelled and sessions having been moved online or postponed. Young Minds (2020) reports that 74% of the young people surveyed can still access support, versus 26% who no longer have access. It is similarly noted that most of those still receiving support feel it is 'ineffective or less effective' because of a lack of private spaces at home (Young Minds, 2020). This makes counselling sessions difficult to carry out over the phone or online, as young people do not always want their families to know they are receiving support or to overhear the topics of the sessions (Young Minds, 2020). Overall, demand for mental health support has increased significantly. Childline reports that 1,600 out of 2,200 calls between late January and early April occurred in March after the lockdown and school closures were announced (NSPCC Learning, 2020). Some young people indicate that it takes longer to receive support and that rising demand means it is harder to get calls answered (Young Minds, 2020). The Child's Commissioner for Wales (2020) report also suggests that, although the majority of young people know where to find mental health support, only 39% of 12-18-year-olds feel confident seeking it. This may be due to the stigma attached to mental health issues, an inability to recognise symptoms because of poor mental health literacy a and a preference for self-reliance. It is therefore suggested that these issues should be addressed in order to encourage more people to seek support (The Child's Commissioner for Wales, 2020).

Supporting young people in a pandemic

As society and guidelines are quickly changing, it is valuable to learn from the work of other charities and trusts to keep developing socially innovative programmes for children and young people. Indeed, some successful initiatives have been carried out across the country during the pandemic. For example, The Diana Award (2020) is spreading positivity through challenges on Tik Tok and Instagram. Many young people have found that avoiding the news is a successful way of self-managing their wellbeing (Girlguiding, 2020) and by spreading positivity, charities can reinforce the positive aspects of social media. Furthermore, Young Minds (2020) suggests young people want more guidance on COVID-19, including local outbreaks and education advice. One respondent highlighted their desire to see more "information about coronavirus which is easy to read and understand" as well as "ideas of things to do on top of my college work...to ensure I'm not bored" (Young Minds, 2020). Likewise, producing blogs that advise young people on how to stay mentally well and manage productivity in online spaces would be appreciated by young people (The Diana Award 2020). Young Minds (2020) similarly highlights that many young people would like to see self-advice support, such as calming strategies, as an additional online therapeutic support. Overall, the National Youth Agency (2020) and Beat Freeks Youth Trends (2020) highlight the need to listen to young people and to allow them to play an active role in deciding which services are offered and how they are carried out. This gives back a voice to young

people and could lessen the feelings of a lack of autonomy and freedom that have resulted from little consultation during the pandemic. Part of People Know How's socially innovative approach in their work with young people is the involvement of those young people in designing projects and services that are relevant to them. During lockdown, young people have similarly consulted when adapting their services to the online environment. Thereby, People Know How represents as a positive example of the value in listening to young people and empower them to design programmes that improve their wellbeing and skills.

Limitations

The literature considered in the writing of this research briefing is surprisingly extensive and thorough, considering the how current the topic is. However, it does bear some limitations. Given the social distancing rules and restrictions of the lockdown most research has had to be carried out remotely, by phone or online. This has meant that, although much of the research highlights the digital divide, there is little reflection of those who do not have access to either a phone or online connection due to vulnerabilities, such as homelessness or poverty. Furthermore, the literature generally focuses on all young people or vulnerable young people as a whole – it rarely focuses on one subsection of young people.

Conclusion

The UK lockdown has had a significant impact on young people. From having

an adverse impact on some children's mental health, to allowing more family time and an opportunity to develop hobbies, the experience has affected everyone differently. This period has highlighted and exacerbated the suffering of the most vulnerable young people in our society (UNICEF, 2020). Indeed, deteriorating mental health, overwhelmed and overworked health and social care systems, growing disparity in education provision, and online vulnerabilities have been reported as a result of the pandemic (Young Minds, 2020). People Know How have successfully adapted their services to work online and have designed a variety of programmes based on the ideas of young people. It is essential that young people, and vulnerable young people in particular, are listened to and consulted in the design of support services. This is something that is already part of People Know How's approach, and something that other charities and organisations would benefit taking onboard. In a few months' time, it may be useful to reflect on how successfully People Know How adapted their services to better deal with potential future outbreaks of the virus, as well as evaluate whether some services may benefit of running online even after society goes back to normal. Indeed, COVID-19 has forced many charities to completely adapt their services and quickly invent new ways of thinking. The third sector is now much better adapted to operating online and providing young people access to counselling services wherever they are. Now and in the future, online support is available like never before.

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