

# Learning from children and young people's experiences of COVID-19

**Recommendations for policy-makers, practitioners and organisations working for, with or on behalf of children and young people**



Economic  
and Social  
Research Council



UNIVERSITY OF THE  
FREE STATE  
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE  
VRYSTAAT  
YUNIVESITIY YA  
FREISTATA



University of Fort Hare  
*Together in Excellence*



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

**PANEX-Youth - Adaptations of young people in monetary-poor households for surviving and recovering from COVID-19 and associated lockdowns**

**Learning from children and young people's experiences of COVID-19**

**Recommendations for policy-makers, practitioners and organisations working for, with or on behalf of children and young people**

**Authors:** Peter Kraftl, Lauren Andres, Cristiana Zara, Victor Agbontean & Nishika Aggarwal

**Contact:** Professor Peter Kraftl, School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham, UK: [p.kraftl@bham.ac.uk](mailto:p.kraftl@bham.ac.uk)

Professor Lauren Andres, Bartlett School of Planning, UCL: [l.andres@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:l.andres@ucl.ac.uk)

# The PANEX-YOUTH Project: Working with young people and supporting them in their lives post-COVID-19

PANEX-Youth was a large-scale research project (which ran 2022-2024), whose main aims were to understand how young people adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic and assess the wider impact of such adaptation processes in South Africa, Brazil and the UK (England). It was jointly funded by the ESRC, the NRF and FAPESP, gathering researchers from five Universities: University College London (UCL) and the University of Birmingham, in the UK; University of the Free State (UFS) and University of Fort Hare in South Africa; and, the University of São Paulo, in Brazil.

This publication outlines the major recommendations for organisations that work with young people in England. The recommendations were co-designed by the research team with a core group of young people and a range of professional stakeholders.

## Ambitions

PANEX-Youth aimed to understand how young people (aged 10-24) adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic and to assess the wider impact of such adaptations. Our research focused on the interconnections between three key elements of young people's everyday lives that were impacted by the pandemic: food, education, and play/leisure. These elements were embedded within a wider understanding of the settings (local places) and home/personal contexts (household composition and home/personal life) of young people.

The findings of the research aim to support local, national and global recovery and the longer-term resilience of societies in a post-pandemic world. To achieve this, we used an action research methodology to co-create knowledge with young people, and the communities in which they live, along with non-government bodies and non-profit organisations that focus on this age group.

## The Research Stages

### Stage 1 – Global Mapping Exercise

Aim: Map and develop typologies of the pandemic's impact on the food/education/play-leisure nexus, with

a focus on young people's vulnerabilities globally, based on an international, integrative review of research and policy literatures.

### Stage 2: – National and Regional Mapping (Brazil, South Africa, UK)

Aim: Examine key impacts of pandemic-related policy on young people's access to and adaptations around food, education and play/leisure at the national, regional and local scale.

### Stage 3: Zooming in on local adaptations of young people in monetary-poor households

Aim: In-depth research with professional stakeholders and young people in each case study region, with a focus on incremental and innovative strategies and the impact of those adaptations on everyday survival and recovery. In England, this research took place in Birmingham and the West Midlands. In total, we worked with 87 young people, using qualitative methods such as interviews and visual mapping. The research was co-produced with young people: we worked with a core group of ten young people from Birmingham City Council's Youth Voice team, who co-designed some of the methods, undertook peer research with some of the young people in our sample, and co-analysed data.

### Stage 4: Co-design of solutions to foster young people's recovery and resilience

Aim: Co-design solutions with our community of young people and key professionals that will help vulnerable young people to recover and be prepared in the eventuality of future major health and socio-economic crises. In England, this process took place in Birmingham and the West Midlands and involved the same core group discussing the project's main findings. Through a series of workshops, young people's recommendations were created and tested with us and a selected group of professional stakeholders.

The recommendations outlined in this report are the culmination of all four stages above, but particularly Stage 4.

## Recommendations

Young people, and particularly vulnerable young people suffered dramatically during the pandemic and continue to do so. They were not seen as a priority during COVID-19 and continue to be neglected in some areas of policy and service provision, despite the significant proportion of their lives affected by this unprecedented health crisis. While a significant amount of public funding was allocated to emergency funding during the pandemic, it was nevertheless insufficient and poorly targeted in some cases. Some (vulnerable) children and young people will struggle to catch up; this will have long-term consequences on their adult lives which cannot be ignored. This report makes recommendations about how to support those young people as well as what could be done differently in the event of a future crisis like COVID-19.

The daily survival of children and young people and their families was ensured due to the involvement and commitment of individuals, communities, faith groups, charities, schools and teachers who all stepped in in unprecedented ways as part of the pandemic solidarity effort. Hence, as well as making recommendations for policy-makers, this report highlights their possible future role (and support needed) in responding to future crises like COVID-19 (Andres et al., 2023a&b<sup>1</sup>).

The recommendations in this report are split into themed sections, although it should be recognised that some cut across different themes/sectors. Moreover, running through our findings – and our recommendations – is the vital consideration that young people's voices were often unheard during COVID-19. Hence, an **overall recommendation** underpinning all of the recommendations in this report, is that **diverse young people – and particularly those who are most marginalised or vulnerable – should have a voice in future policies, actions and decision-making processes.**

### Education and beyond

1. School absence and refusal have increased since COVID-19. Where appropriate, **schools should introduce and/or signpost to students measures that enable school engagement** during and after a period of lockdown (or similar), whilst also addressing the root causes for disengagement.

Cognisant of the multiple pressures on schools, schools may focus on some or all of the following:

- a. making school environments less pressurised (thrown into sharp relief during time at home, when many students felt less pressurised);
- b. measures to support young people with loss of confidence whilst away from school;
- c. addressing sometimes patchy support in schools for student wellbeing and mental health;
- d. finding (creative) ways to mitigate loss of contact with school during a crisis, which in turn can mean loss of the wider benefits of school.

2. There is a need for **further work around the 'soft skills'** that some young people lost or did not develop during COVID-19, particularly as there is a shared feeling that we 'moved on' from the pandemic in a way that did not enable young people to come to terms with what had happened. Many professionals who work with young people have reported that there are cohorts who, for instance, lack the skills and ability to relate to others in appropriate ways. Schools and other learning institutions could, for example, work on relational pedagogic practices, using trauma- and compassion-informed approaches.
3. Whilst recognising they are vital, **we must not over-emphasise the role that schools can play during or after a pandemic.** They cannot provide and do not have the resources to provide a one-stop shop for all the issues young people face. They are not and should not be the only place that CYP gain support – families, friends, communities, and other organisations should also be key. There could be greater consideration of how in turn to support those organisations, and how there could be greater coordination, partnership and/or multi-agency working to ensure some young people, and some needs, do not slip between the cracks.
4. Linked to recommendation 3, there could be **planning for greater resources and sharing of good practice for organisations outside of schools who provided support for home education during lockdowns.** This would also need to acknowledge (as per recommendation 1) that after COVID-19, some young people did not return to school and remained home educated. Any work with such

<sup>1</sup> Andres, L., Moawad, P., Kraftl, P. (2023a), The impact of COVID-19 on Education, Food and Play/Leisure and Related Adaptations of Children and Young People in England, London; Andres, L., Moawad, P., Kraftl, P., Denoon-Stevens, S., Marais, L., Matamanda, A., Bizzotto, L., Giatti, L. (2023b), The Impact of COVID-19 on Education, Food & Play-Leisure and Related Adaptations for Children and Young People: International and National Overviews. PANEX-Youth WP2 Full Report, London Available from: <https://panexyouth.com/home-2/resources/>

organisations should also ask young people how they would like to be supported outside of school.

5. There could be a concerted focus on **support for young people's key transitions – for instance to secondary school, to College/University, and to work**. Those transitions and support for them were compromised during COVID-19, with some young people getting 'lost in transition'. Guidance and support for young people could be two-fold: targeted at young people, now, who missed out during key transitional periods during the COVID-19 pandemic; better preparedness, plans and resources to provide guidance and support for young people going through transitions during future pandemics.
6. **Address inequalities in children and young people's access to greenspace, and outdoor spaces**, which in turn affect their opportunities for play, learning and socialisation. Children and young people are often excluded from outdoor, public and green spaces in their communities; this situation was exacerbated during lockdown restrictions, when playgrounds and other leisure spaces were closed and young people's time outside was limited. There should be greater efforts<sup>2</sup> towards and investment in building on guidance to make public spaces more accessible to diverse children and young people, and placing greater emphasis on children and young people's access to such spaces during a lockdown scenario.

**Information and the role of digital technologies**

7. **Support and advice around technology use (especially social media and gaming) could be more nuanced**. Use of these technologies is a complex issue, especially when children and young people cannot access outside spaces. It should not be assumed that social media use or gaming are always negative behaviours, when they can facilitate learning new skills, socialization and allow downtime; but it should be recognized that use of digital technologies can also be dangerous, problematic and toxic. Supporting young people to find a balance – where that balance may be different during a pandemic – is key.
8. Linked to recommendation 7, **recognise and support the ways in which digital media can enable young people's participation in high-level decision making and co-research** (as with the PANEX-Youth project) alongside or even more than more traditional approaches to meeting/consultation cannot. There could be greater consideration of how to ensure scaling up of these approaches, inclusion in terms of the young people involved (equal access to these opportunities) and training for young people participating in such activities.
9. Ensuring **better preparedness and equitable opportunities for digital access** (to devices and/or data) for different groups of children and young people, their families and those who work with them (both for education and other purposes). There is an opportunity here to engage with the work of UNESCO's Digital Readiness Index<sup>3</sup> team, which assesses and provides recommendations for countries in the event of a pandemic or similar crisis.
10. **Work with young people to battle misinformation around a crises**. Young people have the skills to act as a bridge (and/or to co-produce) accurate information, especially in short form on digital media, to counter misinformation in, for instance, the circulation of public health information during a pandemic.

### **Remembering and learning from COVID-19 – and listening to children and young people**

11. **Learn from what worked in COVID-19**. Some apparently haphazard or reactive approaches happened to work – whether in terms of flexibility in pedagogic approaches or ways of working through digital media, or how local organisations responded to meet local needs. At the national, regional and local scale there could be efforts to collate and share examples of what worked (our longer reports, referenced at the end of this document, are examples of such efforts). Similarly, more learning is still needed on what could still work in a post-COVID context, and what could work in terms of better and equitable preparedness for a future crisis.
12. **Don't just move on**: COVID-19 happened but young people have not had the opportunities to deal with its shorter- and longer-term impacts. COVID-19 was a major part of their lives (proportionately, compared with adults, and because of the impact

2 Examples of guidance on public spaces include 'Planning for Intergenerational Futures' (<https://www.planning4cyp.com/>) and the RTPI's 'Child Friendly Planning in the UK' (<https://www.rtpi.org.uk/practice-rtpi/2019/november/child-friendly-planning-in-the-uk-a-review/>)

3 <https://mgiel.unesco.org/digital-readiness-index>

of restrictions on them). It is crucial to keep talking about COVID-19 and address trauma.

13. **Develop a systemic approach to policy for children and young people, particularly for times during and in the years after a crisis.** In particular, working across health, education and employment can help deal with challenges in respect of young people's transitions. Such policies – as per wider policy-making for young people – need to be aligned, coherent and joined up, stopping young people from falling down the cracks. They also need to be properly resourced and **involve children and young people in appropriate ways in their design.**
14. Those working with and advocating for young people could **call out and put pressure on organisations who should be engaging young people in debate about and responses to crises, but don't.** Examples of good practice in engaging children and young people – whether specifically during crises or more widely – could be collated and shared, with resource to support good forms of engagement.

## Related Reports

The PANEX-YOUTH team published two reports that provide more details about our research findings and which informed the development of the recommendations in this report.

**The impact of COVID-19 on Education, Food and Play/Leisure and Related Adaptations of Children and Young People in England, London** (Andres, L., Moawad, P., Kraftl, P., 2023a). Available from: [https://panexyouth.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/panex\\_englandreport\\_final.pdf](https://panexyouth.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/panex_englandreport_final.pdf)

This report presents and summarises the key results from the first two stages of the PANEX-YOUTH research, with a focus on England. It builds upon the insights from the global and national mapping exercise the team conducted through desk-based research while bringing the results from the 32 interviews done with key organisations between February and June 2023.

**The Impact of COVID-19 on Education, Food & Play-Leisure and Related Adaptations for Children and Young People: International and National Overviews** (Andres, L., Moawad, P., Kraftl, P., Denoon-Stevens, S., Marais, L., Matamanda, A., Bizzotto, L., Giatti, L., 2023b). Available from: [https://panexyouth.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/panex\\_youthreport\\_long\\_final.pdf](https://panexyouth.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/panex_youthreport_long_final.pdf)

This report focuses on the global and national mapping exercise the team conducted through desk-based research. This was built upon an extensive review of reports and literature on how COVID-19 affected young people and specifically their education, access to food, and their play and leisure. Situating the pandemic both in terms of path-dependent responses and intersectional impacts on young people, the report provides insights into the pre-pandemic context to situate the different COVID-19 specific policies and responses. The focus is on young people, and particularly those living in monetary poor households. It also highlights various types of adaptations, coping and resilience that arose from an overall failure from national and local governments to provide for the needs of vulnerable young people during the pandemic, with a focus on England, South Africa and Brazil.