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

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Abstract

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. 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. To accommodate the immense interest and the high quality of many of the submissions, this special issue of YOUNG is a double issue with 11 articles.

Keywords

Everyday, inequality, crisis, COVID-19, youth transitions

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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 towards 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, 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 are suffering 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, such as 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 Phil 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’.

Whilst 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 super-spreaders 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) gleefully reported the UK government’s Health Secretary Matt Hancock advising young people ‘Don’t kill your gran’, urging them to stop flouting coronavirus 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 kickstart 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 has enabled the UK media and government to replay the image of young people as described by Stan Cohen (1972), 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 US 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 has lasted for many months, while other countries, like 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 COP26 on climate, aid and vaccinations, branded a ‘colossal failure’ demonstrate that international inequalities look set to continue (Woodcock & Merrick, 2021).

The COVID-19 crisis has created new benchmarks for what is meaningful, with self-isolating and the practicing 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 studies has 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 (2020, 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. Whilst we have endeavoured to curate a double special issue which sheds light on young people’s varied experiences across the world, we are cognisant 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 throughout 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 six 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 across national settings but also among young people in different circumstances and life situations.

In the article ‘Youth, Precarious Work and the Pandemic’ by Steven Threadgold, Julia Cook, David Farrugia and Julia Coffey, we are situated in Australia and follow
young hospitality workers’ ability to stay in work during the initial first phase of lockdown. The article underlines, how a global crisis is hitting young people differently, as the financially most vulnerable young people cannot turn to family support, when they become victims of the stay-at-home measurement and lose their jobs. It also demonstrates how a crisis is accentuating inequality as young people working in an industry characterized by no rights and contracts are left with nowhere to turn, when employers decide to cut them off.

The article by Virpi Timonen, Jo Greene and Ayeshah Émon: ‘We’re Meant to be Crossing Over … but the Bridge is Broken’ looks at university graduates of 2020 and their experiences of the pandemic in Ireland through interview data. The insights offered from the article explore the realistic career worries and immediate concerns yet also notes the flexibility of young people to respond to the pandemic in a responsible way, whilst in the background they are aware of the potential negative implications on their future. These young people show great resourcefulness and awareness which counters the negative media reporting linked to young people’s actions.

The article by Merike Darmody, Emer Smyth and Helen Russell: ‘Impacts of the COVID-19 Control Measures on Widening Educational Inequalities’, takes a more global perspective on widening education inequalities with a focus on disadvantaged groups, to reflect on how a public health crisis has created and potentially reinforced future social divisions for vulnerable sets of young people. Through a critical review of literature and policy developments, Darmody takes a critical stance on how the government control measures have resulted in lost learning opportunities for young people which may never be regained.

In their article ‘Pandemic Impacts for Indigenous Children and Youth within Canada: An Ethical Analysis’, the authors Carly Heck, Meghan Eaker, Satya Cobos, Sydney Campbell and Franco Carnevale draw upon three Indigenous philosophical tenets (interconnected relationships, holism and restorative justice) to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on the wellbeing of Indigenous young people. Their critical analysis seeks to inform future pandemic measures affecting Indigenous young people and open up discussion about the experiences of Indigenous communities around the world.

The article named ‘Emerging Adulthood in the Time of Pandemic: The COVID-19 Crisis in the Lives of Rural Young Adults in Finland’ by Kaisa Vehkalahti, Päivi Armila and Ari Sivenius points to an important but overlooked consequence of the crisis, namely how it is impacting young people lives in rural areas differently. Vehkalahti and her co-authors have followed young people in sparsely populated rural areas in Finland before the crisis and thus demonstrated that for many of these young people moving to the cities is the only way of transiting to adulthood. However, the pandemic suddenly questions this trajectory, as many of the young people decided to move back home, to their rural regions. Although it was presented mostly as a voluntary choice, it still left the young people with unanswered questions about their future and a feeling of taking a step back and thus being in a yo-yo transition.

Frances Howard, Andy Bennett, Ben Green, Paula Guerra, Sofia Sousa and Ernesta Sofija’s study on 77 young musicians from three countries—Australia, England and Portugal—is titled ‘It’s Turned Me from a Professional to a “Bedroom DJ” Once Again: COVID-19 and New forms of Inequality for Young Music-Makers’. We are taken into the precarious world of young people as musicians where self-sufficiency hangs on a knife edge. Risk and uncertainty have been a constant feature
for these young people because of leisure venues being shut down. Helplessness and resentment are apparent but at the same time we directly witness the resourcefulness of young people as musicians to adapt their musical identities for the future.

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