



The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Young People

The Boys' Brigade

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Summary and key messages

Since the earliest days of the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been concern about its impact on young people. How would a generation cope, that was already struggling with loneliness and poor mental health? What would be the impact of school closures? Loss of social time? Digital exclusion? Several studies have now been published that help us begin to answer these questions, and the results are predictably mixed. Both positive and negative impacts have been reported to date, and complexities in the data make simple explanations hard to find.

Between March 2020 and January 2022 young people and schools faced a variety of restrictions, from national lockdowns to mask wearing (see Appendix 1). Some of the effects of these experiences on young people have been due to the withdrawal or inaccessibility of services e.g. closure of youth facilities or delays in accessing treatment due to Covid restrictions and Covid-related absences. Others are related to the mental health impacts of experiencing lockdowns, isolation and uncertainty about the future.

Early in the pandemic young people were using social media to socialise more, but the way they interact online has changed more recently. Less social interaction is now occurring in public domains online, with young people preferring to use chat groups, and consuming more 'professionalised' content from social media apps rather than creating their own or watching content uploaded by friends.

For some young people the pandemic had a positive legacy, leading to improved mental health and fostering greater resilience. However, variations in the data suggest that young people who were experiencing disadvantage before the pandemic were disproportionately negatively affected by it, whether that was due to lack of accessible safe spaces and relationships, increased barriers to learning during lockdowns or increased vulnerability to criminal exploitation and/or exclusion.

LGBT+ young people have been particularly affected by the pandemic, being less likely to have strong relationships at home, more likely to have their mental health negatively impacted and less likely to feel optimistic about the future.

It is too soon to know how the experience of living through a pandemic will ultimately shape this generation, or what the long-term impacts will be for different groups – especially in light of wider events and forces, like the Russian-Ukraine war and the 'Cost of Living Crisis'. But there is no denying that many young people face real and pressing needs as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this context, The Boys Brigade has an opportunity to share and embody a vital message. To be present in those spaces where services have been cut, where young people face disadvantage, where waiting lists are too long and where uncertainty reigns. To bring a message that experiencing life in all its fullness is a reality that is open to all; that there are people willing to come alongside them, to invest themselves in relationship and genuinely care for them; that they are included, they are valued and they have something to offer each other and the world.

Methodology

Overview

This report is a rapid review of published data on the impact of the pandemic on young people in the UK.

It draws mainly on data from research reports written by government departments, longitudinal studies and research projects with large sample sizes and robust methodologies. Because we are reviewing a relatively recent and short time frame, where there are gaps in evidence from longitudinal studies, we have used snapshot surveys to provide additional data. We have supplemented this data with links to relevant news reports and included published quotes from young people and professionals.

This report focuses on data related to 10–18-year-olds across the UK,¹ and for ease of communication, we refer to ‘young people’ throughout the document.² It has not always been possible to identify studies that are UK wide, and so we sometimes report on data that is solely from England.

Limitations of the report

We are confident that the main, and most robust, sources of evidence published to date are included in this report. However, this summary is not exhaustive or comprehensive given the short timeframe for the work and the time it can take for research to be published. More robust data will be published in the coming years, that will continue to shape and change our understanding of the pandemic.

It has become widely accepted that, while we all experienced the same restrictions, we were not all affected by the pandemic in the same way. This is certainly true of young people, whose experiences were shaped by a range of factors including family situations, living conditions, ethnicity, age, mental health, and family income. We highlight these differences where the data is available, but there will inevitably be aspects of some young people’s experiences that are not yet understood.

Key data sources

This report draws on published information from a variety of sources including government, academic, voluntary and private sector organisations.

Key sources are as follows.

¹ While The Boys Brigade also works in the Republic of Ireland, the terms of this report only cover the United Kingdom.

² The term ‘children and young people’ is frequently used in other published work.

Understanding Society	UK wide household panel survey 40,000 households each year. 10-15 year olds (used as a source for the State of the Nation Reports)
Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England	Cohort 2: Our Future – 2013 – current (used as a source for the State of the Nation Reports)
Millennium Cohort Study	Following 19,000 young people born in 2000/01 – The COSMO Briefing Papers that report on the impact of Covid-19 on different aspects of young people’s lives and experiences use this cohort. The COSMO study consists of two annual waves of data collection from a representative sample of over 13,000 young people in year 11 in the academic year 2020-21 across England. All the briefings drawn from in this report are from Wave 1 of the survey which ran between October 2021 and March 2022 when the young people were in year 12 (age 16-17)
Mental Health of Children and Young People	NHS Digital Longitudinal Survey 2886 young people age 7-16 in 2017, 2020, 2021 and 2022
Children’s People and Nature Survey	Two surveys in 2 waves each with approximately 2000 young people age 8-15 each time. Wave 1 in August 2021 and Wave 2 in Sep-Oct 2021 and Wave 3 in Apr-Jul 2022 and Wave 4 in Oct 2022.
Ofcom Children’s Media Lives Surveys	Longitudinal project that follows the same group of 18 young people age 8-18 for the last 9 years. The cohort is small therefore not representative and filmed interviews are conducted each year.

Part 1. Satisfaction

Summary

Most of the data in this section comes from the State of the Nation Reports and we see a complex picture of young people's happiness, before and during the pandemic. For young people as a whole group, self-reported rates of happiness and satisfaction in most areas seem to remain consistent. But when we investigate the data in more depth, we can see the proportion of young people scoring below the midpoint (suggesting unhappiness) has risen in several areas. This implies that the distribution of scores in these areas will be more polarised i.e., for average rates to remain stable there are more young people scoring their happiness at the lower and upper ends. There are variances between themes as follows:

- Rise at start of pandemic now dropped back down (e.g. happiness with use of time).
- Rise at start of pandemic but not yet back to previous levels (e.g. happiness with appearance).
- Spike at the start of the pandemic sits within pre-existing trend of rising rates (e.g. physical health, relationships).

So, while more young people are saying they are happy overall, the data also shows that at the end of the pandemic more young people were unhappy with certain aspects of their lives including their relationships, appearance and physical health.

Overall happiness and satisfaction with life

Young people's overall happiness, satisfaction with life, and sense that the things they do in their lives are worthwhile saw a dip in the early stages of the pandemic. However, these have returned to pre-pandemic levels. The percentages of young people reporting low scores also dropped between 2021 and 2022, suggesting there has been a general increase in happiness and satisfaction for young people, rather than just in one or two demographic groups. (Please note data in the graphs in this section of the report represent slightly different but comparable cohorts; 2013-15, 2016-19 and 2020-22, see footnote for details)³

³ *State of the Nation 2022: Children and Young People's Wellbeing. Data for 2013-2019 is Great Britain while 2020-22 is UK) and the reported response for '2013 to 2015' is a pooled average based on four half-annual surveys of children and young people reported in the 2015 Good Childhood Report Source: The Children's Society. These surveys are representative of the general population of children and young people. Data in the graphs is reported as an average score out of 10 (0-10) or a % of young people scoring below the midpoint (less than 5).*

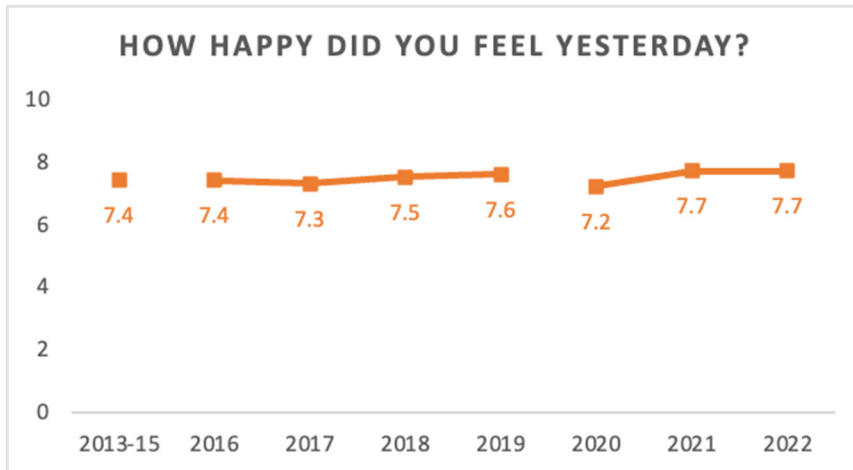


Figure 1. Average happiness score (out of 0-10)

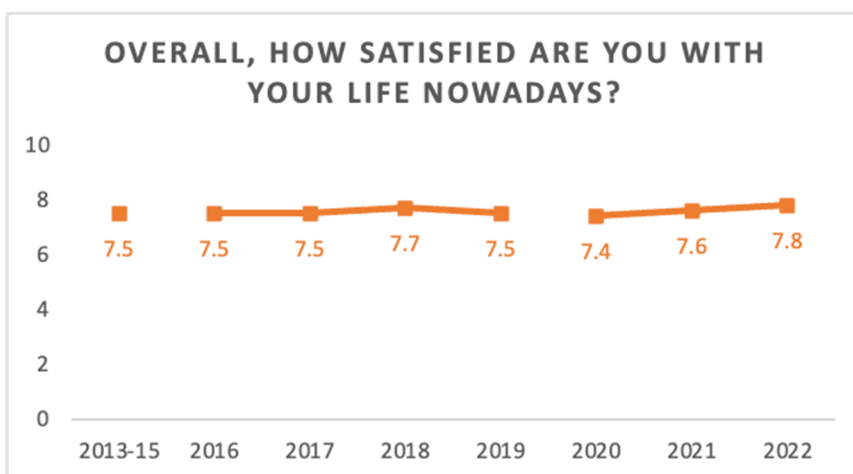


Figure 2. Average score for satisfaction with life (out of 0-10)

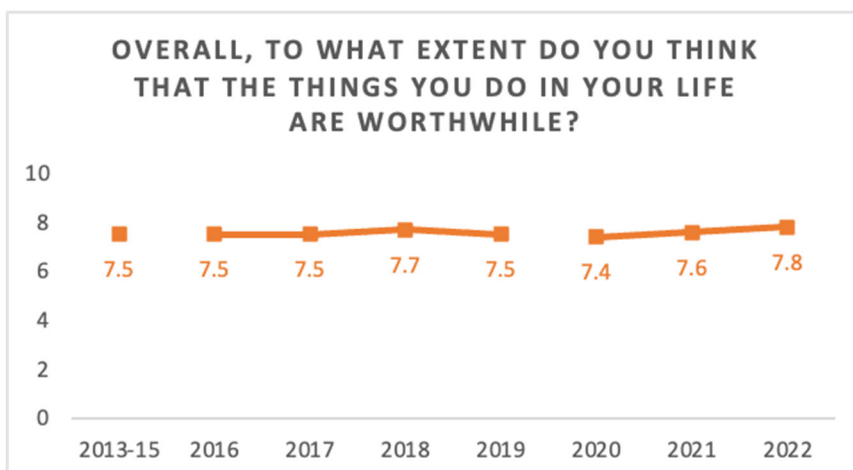


Figure 3. Average score for how worthwhile things you do in your life (out of 0-10)

Similarly young people’s ratings of how happy they are with their use of time remained stable before, during and after the pandemic. However, unlike overall happiness, there was a sharp increase in 2020 in the percentage of young people giving a low score (4.9% to 9.1%) likely reflecting the impact of the restrictions during the first lockdown. This has since dropped almost back to previous levels.

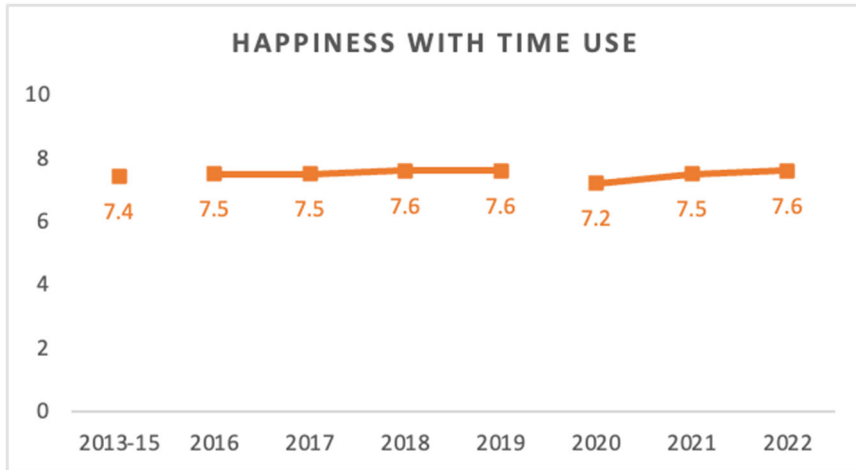


Figure 4. Average score for happiness with time use (out of 0-10)

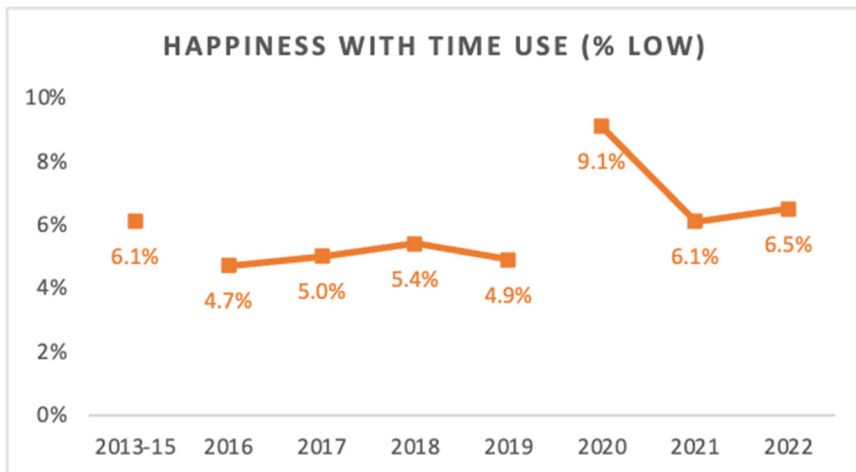


Figure 5. Percentage of young people who are unhappy with their time use

We see a similar pattern with young people’s satisfaction with how much choice they have in their life. It is clear that that more young people were unhappy with how much choice they had in their life during 2020, and that even though these percentages dropped in 2021 and 2022, they have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels.

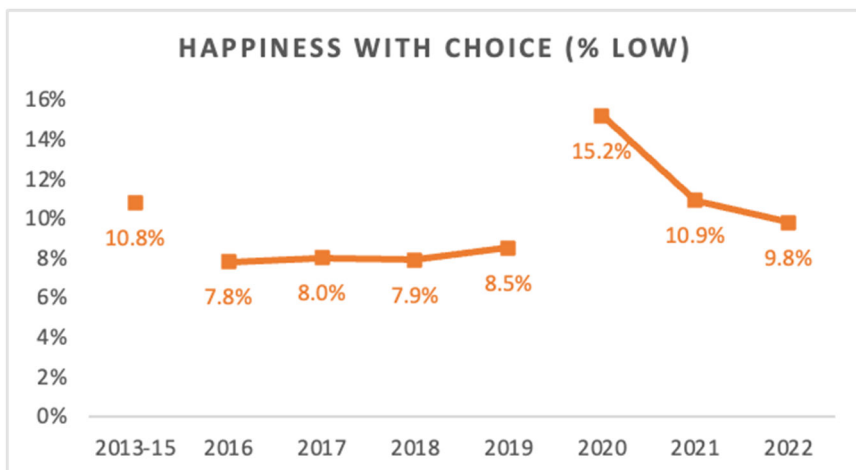


Figure 6. Percentage of young people who are unhappy with how much choice they have in life

Appearance

Overall young people's satisfaction with their appearance remained fairly consistent throughout the pandemic but the percentage of young people giving low scores increased sharply in 2020 and although this dropped in 2021 it still remains higher than prior to the pandemic.

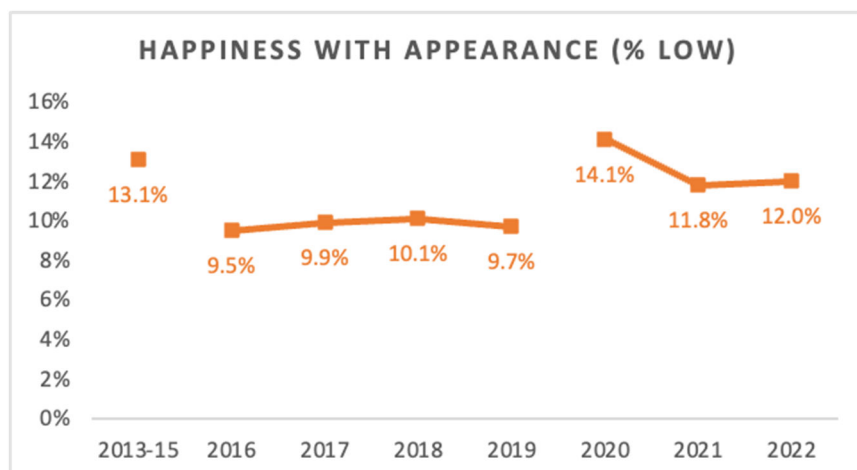


Figure 7. Percentage of young people who are unhappy with their appearance

During a period of not seeing people face to face, some young people appear to become more critical of their own appearance. While it is not clear exactly why this would be, it is possible that face-to-face interaction was replaced by greater social media use, which for some young people had a negative impact on their self-image. An Ofcom report in August 2020 reported that some girls were consuming body-conscious exercise content and some were feeling pressure from seeing others exercising on social media.⁴

“I hate them [selfies]. They’ve caught on so much with everyone. Endless photos of girls with duck faces in soft-lensing. The whole world looks like a bad seventies porn film again. And the weird thing is they never look like the actual person.”

Joni (Age 17)⁵

Health

Average scores for how young people rated their physical health were also fairly consistent before and during the pandemic. However there has been an increase in the percentage of young people giving low scores across the last eight years so.

⁴ ‘Children’s Media Lives Life in Lockdown.Pdf’

<https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0024/200976/cml-life-in-lockdown-report.pdf> [accessed 1 June 2023].

⁵ Chloe Combi, *Generation Z: Their Voices, Their Lives* (London: Penguin, Random House, 2015) p.65.

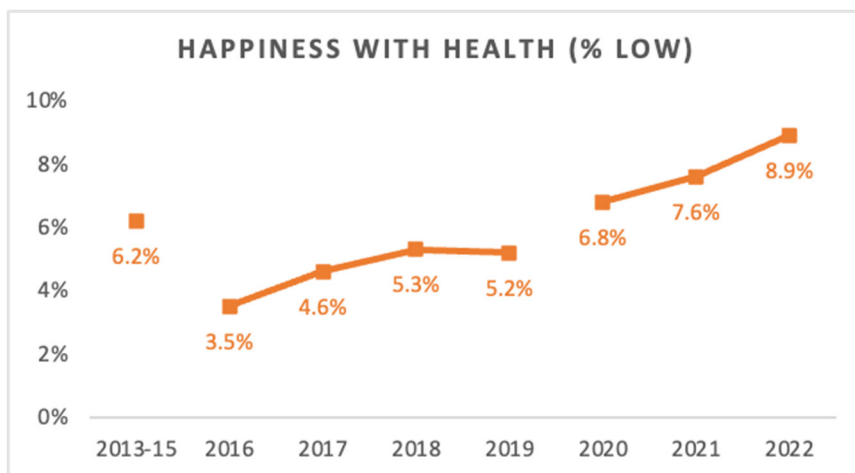


Figure 8. Percentage of young people unhappy with their health

Relationships

Overall happiness with family relationships remained stable during the pandemic. However a small increase in the percentage of young people scoring low before the pandemic appears to have been accelerated between 2020 and 2022.

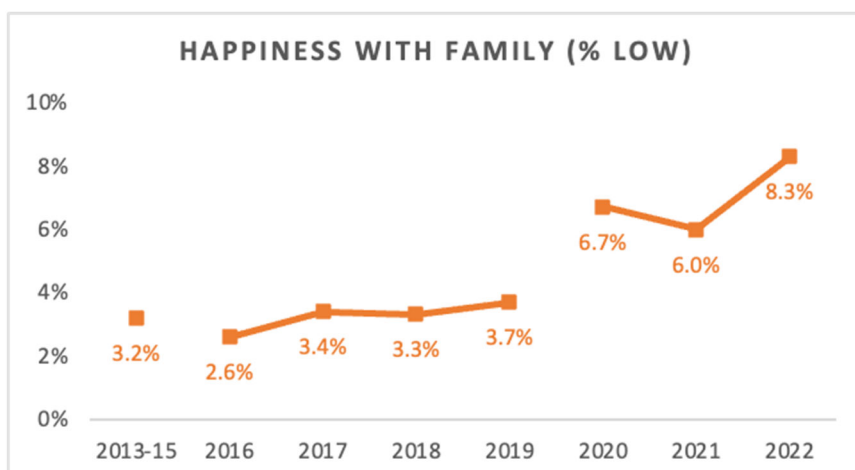


Figure 9. Percentage of young people unhappy with family relationships

More young people appear to be reporting that they are less happy with family relationships and being forced to spend more time with family may have resulted in strained family relationships for some young people. LGBT+ young people are less likely to have strong relationships at home and therefore to have been more adversely affected by the pandemic and its lockdowns. Research from Dec 2020 to Jan 2021 into the impact of the pandemic on LGBT+ young people found that 27% of LGBT+ young people describe their relationship with their family as very close compared with 50% of non-LGBT+ young people.⁶

When it comes to friendships we see a slightly different result. Overall ratings remained stable as in other areas. 2020 saw a sharp increase in the percentage of young people scoring low ratings of satisfaction with friendships. This dropped back by over a third in 2021 but has since increased again slightly. Adolescence is a period when learning to

⁶ 'Just-Like-Us-2021-Report-Growing-Up-LGBT.Pdf' <<https://www.justlikeus.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Just-Like-Us-2021-report-Growing-Up-LGBT.pdf>> [accessed 3 May 2023].

navigate peer relationships is a highly significant developmental process for young people. It is unclear yet whether this more recent rise is continuing a trend that preceded 2020; or whether young people’s experiences during the pandemic are the main cause of increasing numbers of young people being less happy with their friendships.

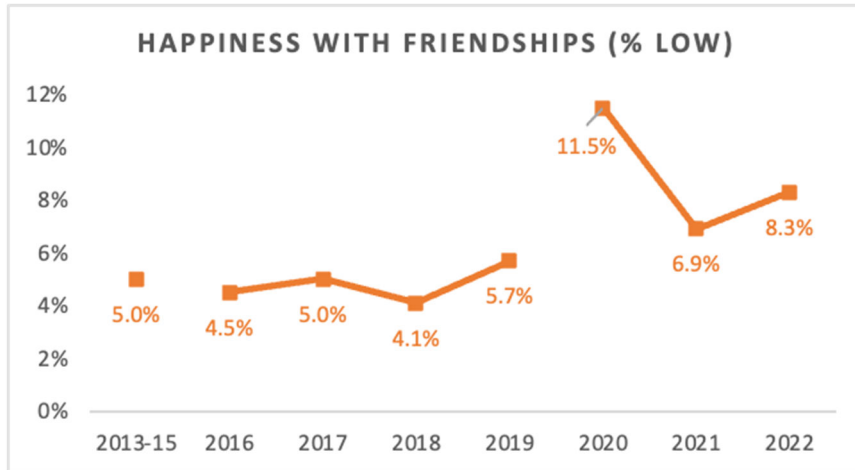


Figure 10. Percentage of young people unhappy with friendships

School and future

Young people’s views on their happiness with school and “the future” show different results. The percentage of young people reporting low happiness with school has been slowly rising over the last decade. Perhaps surprisingly the largest increase in low scores was in 2022, rather than 2020.

The percentage of young people reporting low happiness with the future had been reducing before the pandemic, but saw a sharp rise in 2020. These rates have since dropped, but remain higher than pre- pandemic levels.

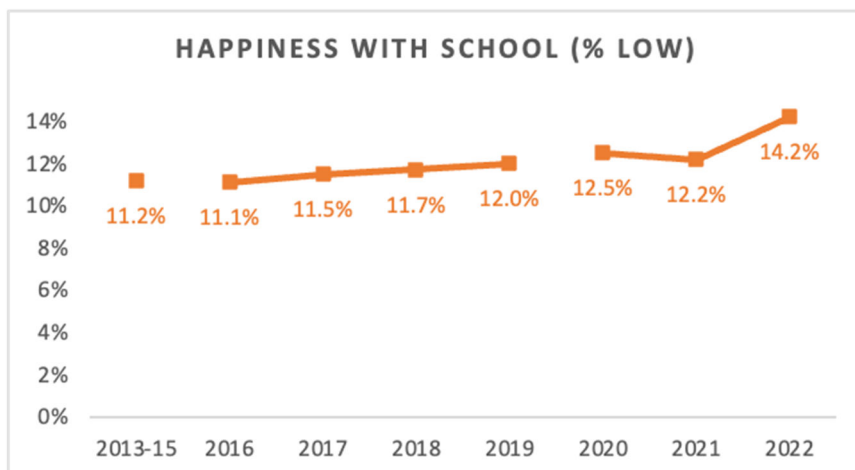


Figure 11. Percentage of young people unhappy with school

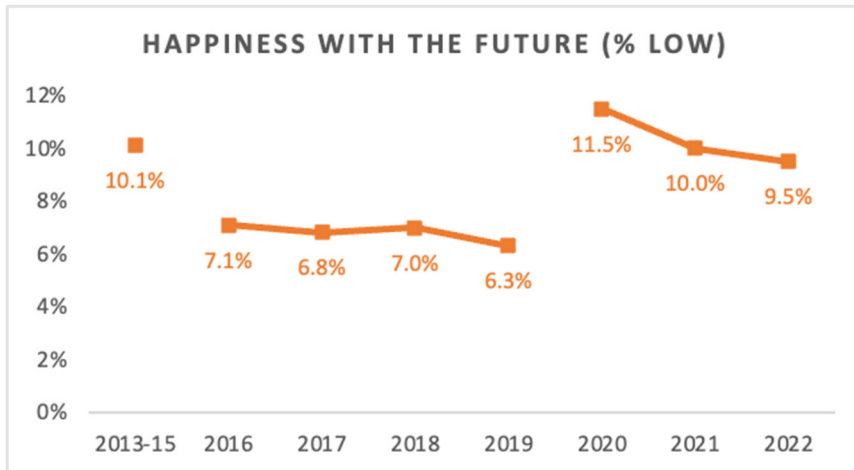


Figure 12. Percentage of young people who are unhappy with the future

“Young people in the UK today are facing a unique set of repercussions from the pandemic, impacting their education, employment and wellbeing, and leaving them destabilised and debilitated.”

Jonathan Townsend, UK Chief Executive of the Prince’s Trust⁷

⁷ ‘New Research from The Prince’s Trust Reveals Almost Half of Young People in the UK Feel Anxious about Their Future on a Daily Basis | News and Views | About The Trust | The Prince’s Trust’ <<https://www.princes-trust.org.uk/about-the-trust/news-views/class-of-Covid-report>> [accessed 23 May 2023].

Part 2. Health

Summary

The pandemic had a negative impact on several aspects of young people's health and wellbeing. Childhood vaccination rates dropped and have not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels, obesity rates in younger children spiked and 16-18 year olds reported disruption to their quality of sleep. Young people were more likely than the general population to report having long Covid and were more likely to say it impacted on their daily activities.

Young people appeared to be slightly less physically active during the early stages of the pandemic, and while the amount of time they spend being active seems to have returned to pre-pandemic levels, they are also spending more time per day being physically inactive.

Young people's mental health has also been affected, with the pandemic exacerbating a pre-existing trend of rising rates. Some groups have been more vulnerable to the negative impacts on their mental health than others but there is also some data to suggest that for others there have been positive effects.

There has been a significant rise in hospitalisations for eating disorders, delays in urgent treatment referrals and additional reports that frontline services are struggling to cope with the complexities of young people's post-pandemic needs.

Physical health: Sleep, vaccination, obesity and long Covid

During the pandemic young people reported increased quantities of sleep, but for 16-18 year olds this sleep was of lower quality, with more disturbances. This may have been related to the uncertainties around the education system and examination procedures at the time.⁸

"During this [third] lockdown there has been far more pressure from schools to continue working at 100% because no one is sure what will happen with exams. Also, it's much harder to get outside as it's winter so there is a large feeling of isolation."

A Young Person (a participant in the Young Minds Lockdown Survey Jan 2021)⁹

Quality of sleep is linked to mental health, happiness and wellbeing, as well as physical health. In 2022, those who regularly struggled with sleep were more likely to have a mental

⁸ Gaby Illingworth and others, 'Sleep in the Time of COVID-19: Findings from 17000 School-Aged Children and Adolescents in the UK during the First National Lockdown', *SLEEP Advances*, 3.1 (2022), zpab021 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/sleepadvances/zpab021>>.

⁹ 'Youngminds-Coronavirus-Report-Jan-2021.Pdf' <<https://www.youngminds.org.uk/media/esifqn3z/youngminds-coronavirus-report-jan-2021.pdf>> [accessed 24 May 2023].

disorder, and sleep problems were more likely in older children and young people, specifically young women - groups particularly at risk for poorer mental health and wellbeing in general.¹⁰

Vaccination rates for tetanus, diphtheria and polio in young people did drop during the pandemic, due to a combination of young people not being in school during lockdowns, medical staff absences due to self-isolation and school immunisation teams being involved in Covid-19, and an extension of the influenza vaccination delivery to all young people. Rates in 2022 were not yet back to pre-pandemic levels. We won't know whether these drops in rates are temporary or have any impact on disease incidence until that data is published in due course.¹¹

The pandemic led to a spike in obesity rates in young people in reception and year 6. Prior to this there had been an upward trend for year 6 while levels in reception were lower and stable. Rates for both groups have dropped back down to slightly higher than pre-pandemic levels. Obesity is linked to deprivation with a steady increase in rates from the least deprived areas (IDACI 10 - 13.5% Year 6) to the most deprived areas (IDACI 1 - 31.3% Year 6).¹²

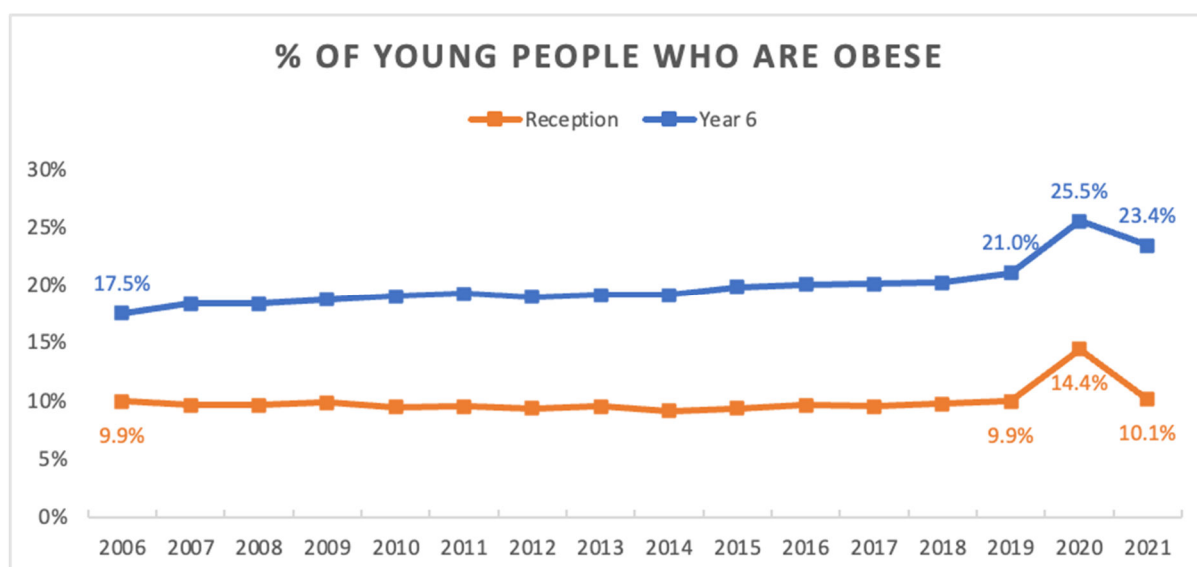


Figure 13. Percentage of young people in Reception and Year 6 who are obese

Young people were more likely than the general population to self-report having long Covid and to report negative impacts on their daily lives as a result. Compared to an average 2% of the overall population reporting each month that they had long Covid between October 2021-March 2022¹³, 9% of young people in the COSMO survey in the same period reported

¹⁰ *State of the Nation 2022: Children and Young People's Wellbeing.*

¹¹ 'Young People at Risk of Disease as Concerning Numbers Miss out on Life-Saving Vaccines', GOV.UK <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/young-people-at-risk-of-disease-as-concerning-numbers-miss-out-on-life-saving-vaccines>> [accessed 24 May 2023].

¹² *State of the Nation 2022: Children and Young People's Wellbeing.*

¹³ 'Prevalence of Ongoing Symptoms Following Coronavirus (COVID-19) Infection in the UK - Office for National Statistics' <<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bullet>>

that they had long Covid.¹⁴ 70% of these young people said it impacts on their ability to carry out daily activities compared with an average of 64% of the overall population. Young people with long Covid are more likely to live in deprived areas of the UK. Pupils with long COVID who reported a severe effect on everyday life achieved lower GCSE scores than their peers who did not suffer from this experience, when all other variables are held constant.¹⁵

Physical activity

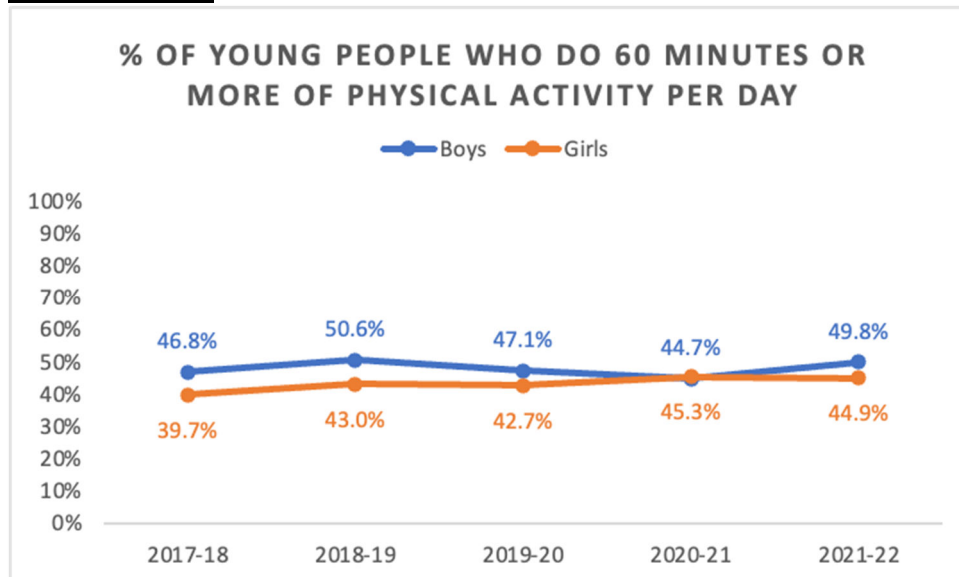


Figure 14. Percentage of young people who do 60 minutes or more of physical activity per day by gender

Data from the Sport England annual survey suggests the pandemic had little effect on the time young people spend in physical activity each day with only a slight decrease for boys between 2019-21 compared with previous years. This may have been because lockdown restrictions had more impact on boys' activity levels than girls. Levels of activity are related to family affluence, with more young people from affluent families being likely to spend over 60 minutes per day active than those from less affluent families.

In 2022 Sport England reported that 47.2% of young people age 5-16 years old spend at least 60 minutes per day in physical activity.¹⁶ This is slightly higher than accelerometer results from a study of moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA) in 10 and 11 year olds. Data from a comparator group from March 2017-May 2018 showed that 40% of young people were spending 60 minutes or more in MVPA, compared with 37% in Jun to Dec 2021 and 41% from Jan 2022 to July 2021. Interestingly this study also showed that while levels had returned to where they were pre-pandemic, young people were spending an average of 13 minutes more a day in sedentary activity than prior to the pandemic. So while levels of

ins/prevalenceofongoingsymptomsfollowingcoronavirusCovid19infectionintheuk/30march2023> [accessed 24 May 2023].

¹⁴ Erica Holt-White, Xin Shao, and others, 'Briefing No. 5 - Health Impacts and Behaviours', *COSMO*, 2023 <<https://cosmostudy.uk/publications/health-impacts-and-behaviours>> [accessed 26 April 2023].

¹⁵ Holt-White, Shao, and others.

¹⁶ *State of the Nation 2022: Children and Young People's Wellbeing*.

physical activity may have returned to 'normal', the time that young people spend being physically inactive has increased.¹⁷

The COSMO study found that before the pandemic 60% of Year 10 pupils in their study were taking part in sport or exercise outside of their PE lessons, but this fell to 44% on their return to school in year 11. This may have been due to a reduction in activities available post-pandemic and/or an increase in academic pressure in their GCSE examination year. Overall, these young people reported much lower levels of physical activity than the Sport England Survey or accelerometer data with only 7% saying they spent at least 30 minutes in physical activity each day.¹⁸ The reasons for this wide variation aren't discussed in the research report but may be due partly to how data in the COSMO study was collected. Young people were asked in 2021/22 to report on their behaviours in 2020/21 during the height of the pandemic, this therefore relies on their perceptions 12 months on rather than annual reporting of current behaviour as in the Sport England surveys.

Mental health

Rates of Probable Mental Disorder as determined by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) increased for all age groups and both genders at the start of the pandemic but there are variances in rates since then, as shown in the graphs below. It should also be noted that we know from other data that rates were already rising prior to the pandemic.¹⁹ While rates among 7- to 10-year-olds have started to decline again, rates in 11-16 and 17-19 year olds are at their highest for both genders.

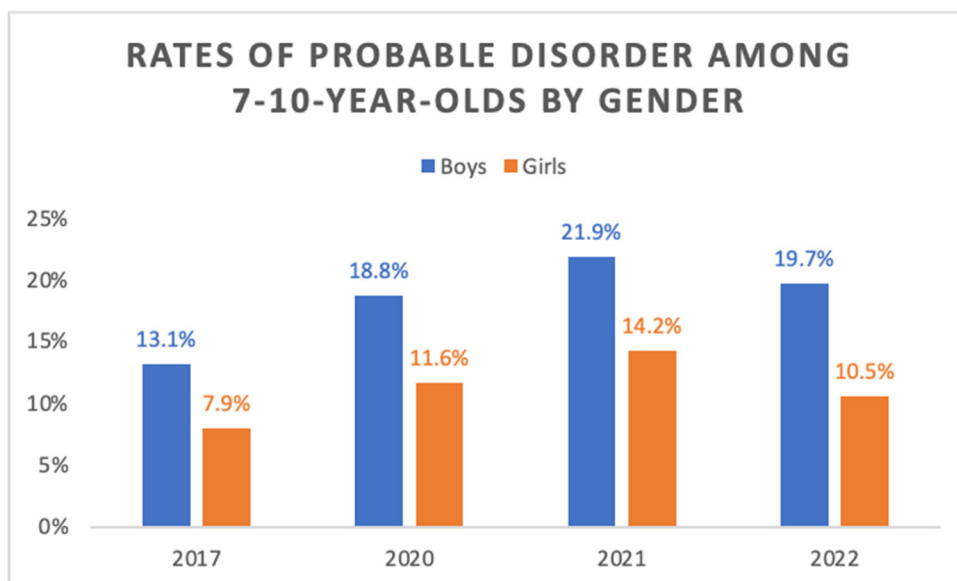


Figure 15. Rates of probably mental disorder among 7-10-year-olds by gender (SDQ)

¹⁷ Russell Jago and others, 'Short and Medium-Term Effects of the COVID-19 Lockdowns on Child and Parent Accelerometer-Measured Physical Activity and Sedentary Time: A Natural Experiment', *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 20.1 (2023), 42 <<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12966-023-01441-1>>.

¹⁸ Holt-White, Shao, and others.

¹⁹ Lisa Kuhn and others, 'Children and Young People's Wellbeing and Mental Health during the Covid-19 Pandemic'.

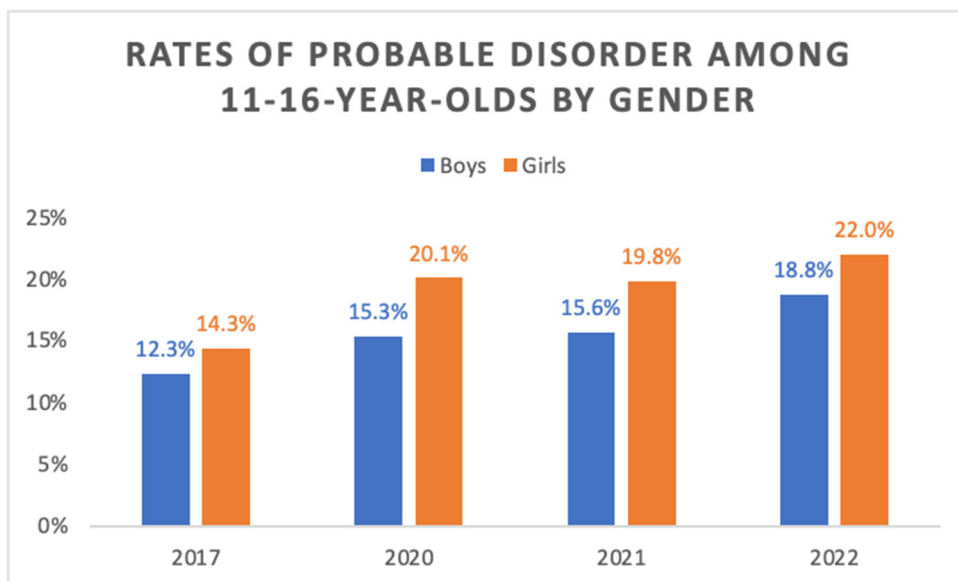


Figure 16. Rates of probable mental disorder among 11-16-year-olds by gender (SDQ)

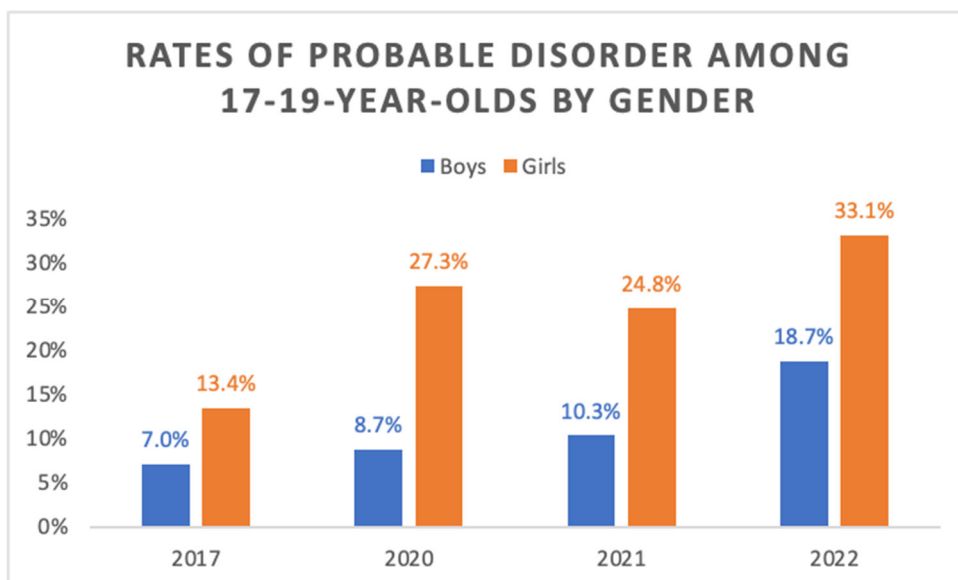


Figure 17. Rates of probable mental disorder among 17-19-year-olds by gender (SDQ)

Rates in the COSMO study that used a different measure (GHQ-12 – score of 4 or more) to indicate probable mental health distress were higher with 44% of young people reaching the threshold in 2021/22. Rather than causing a rise in rates the pandemic seems to have exacerbated a pre-existing trend of increasing rates.

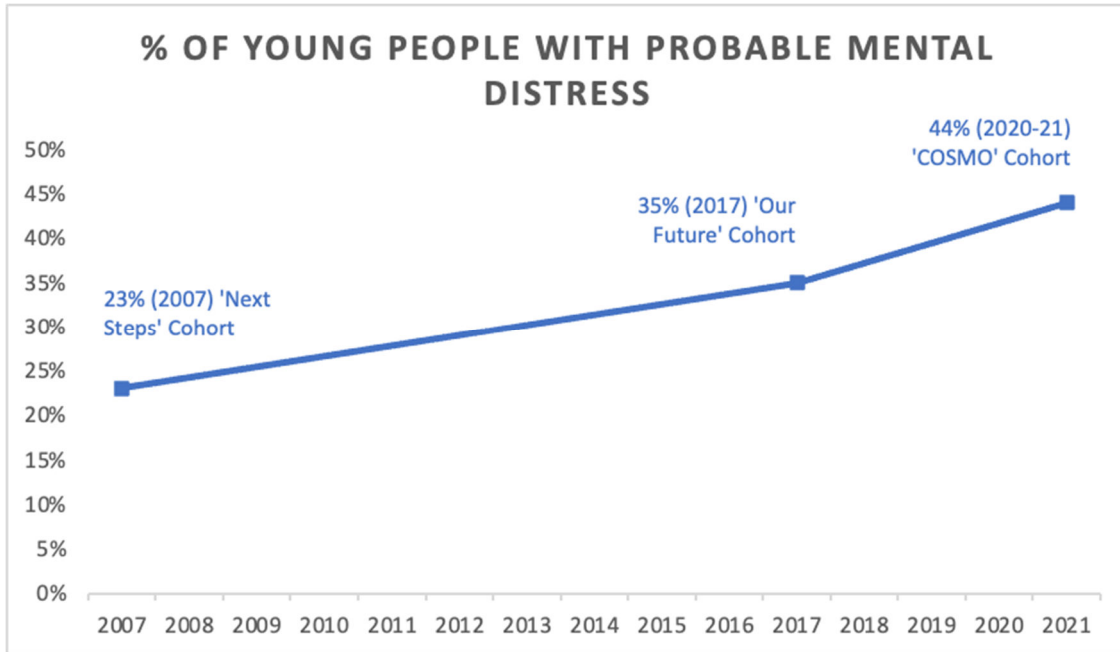


Figure 18. Percentage of young people with probable mental health distress (GHQ-12)

Some groups of young people were at higher risk of probable mental distress or disorder.²⁰

- Those who reported having long Covid or who had to shield during the pandemic. For instance, 66% of those with severe long Covid which largely affected ability to carry out daily activities, reported high psychological distress.
- Those who experienced major life events during the pandemic, such as being seriously ill and suffering from food affordability issues.
- There are stark differences between genders with those identifying as non-binary being more likely to suffer psychological distress, self-harm or attempt suicide compared with females and males.

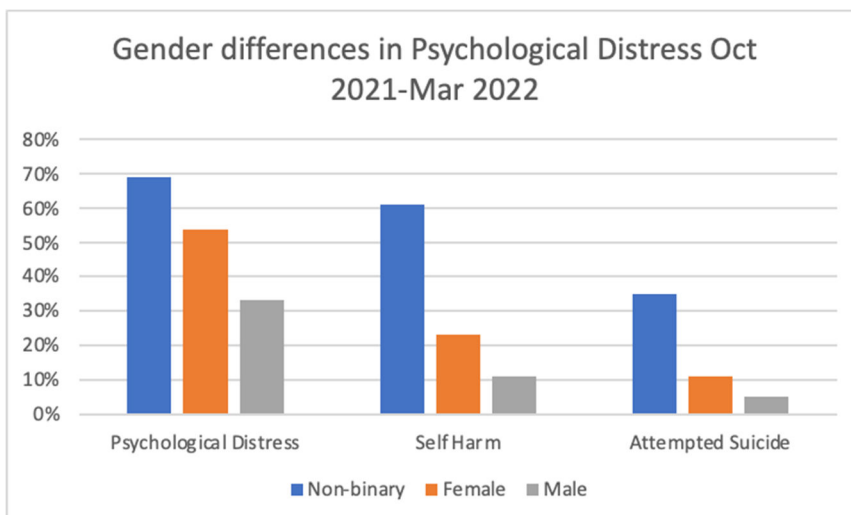


Figure 19. Gender differences in psychological distress Oct-21 to Mar 22

²⁰ Erica Holt-White, Alice De Gennaro, and others, 'Briefing No. 4 - Mental Health and Wellbeing', COSMO, 2022 <<https://cosmostudy.uk/publications/mental-health-and-wellbeing>> [accessed 26 April 2023].

- Young people in state schools were less happy with the mental health support provided than in independent schools and within all schools young people from the middle deprivation quintiles were less happy with support than other students, suggesting it was focused on those at either end of the deprivation scales.
- Those from advantaged backgrounds were more likely to say they had self-harmed, as were those with caring responsibilities, who also were more likely to have attempted suicide.

A scoping review in 2023 of 69 studies from around the world suggests that young people experiencing low socio-economic status, financial worries, material hardship, lack of space, negative home-schooling experiences, bad physical health, and diagnosis of a neurodevelopmental disorder were more likely to experience stronger negative mental health effects due to the pandemic.²¹ In a reflection of the complexity of the data being reviewed, the four UK studies included showed that the pandemic worsened some young people's mental health, improved others and for some caused no change. For young people for whom the pandemic had positive impacts examples given were young people feeling calmer, being happy to spend more time with their family, communication with parents improving and serving as a protective factor against anxiety.²²

Additional research by Just Like Us found that transgender young people have felt increasingly vulnerable throughout the coronavirus pandemic.²³ They were more likely to say their mental health has got worse during lockdown (70%) than their non-transgender peers (55%) and almost twice as likely to say they worried about their mental health daily (65% compared to 36%). They were also considerably more likely to experience daily tension in the place they are living (29%) than non-transgender young people (18%), which can indicate an increased risk of homelessness.

Further data from the Millennium Cohort Study found that consistently higher numbers of sexual minority young people reported negative health impacts of the pandemic, including:²⁴

- severe psychological distress (30% compared with 14% heterosexual)
- clinically significant anxiety symptoms (36% compared with 22%)
- lower levels of social support
- 4 x the odds of self-reporting poor health

²¹ Kristin Wolf and Julian Schmitz, 'Scoping Review: Longitudinal Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Child and Adolescent Mental Health', *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 2023 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-023-02206-8>>.

²² Urvashi Panchal and others, 'The Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Child and Adolescent Mental Health: Systematic Review', *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 2021 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-021-01856-w>>.

²³ 'Just-Like-Us-2021-Report-Growing-Up-LGBT.Pdf'.

²⁴ Laia Bécarea and Dylan Kneale, 'Inequalities in Mental Health, Self-Rated Health, and Social Support among Sexual Minority Young Adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Analyses from the UK Millennium Cohort Study', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 57.10 (2022), 1979–86 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-022-02291-1>>.

Eating disorders

Three quarters of girls aged 17-19 screened positive for eating problems in 2021 and 2022, an increase from 61% in 2017. A rise was also seen in rates for boys at the same age (30% to 45%). Rates in 11-16 year olds were much lower but still showed a rise for both boys and girls with an overall change from 7% in 2017 to 13% in 2022.²⁵

When compared to hospitalisations for eating disorders we can see that rates for boys more than double between 2015-16 and 2020-21 while rates for girls are still significantly higher and rise to almost double with a sharp rise in the early stages of the pandemic.²⁶

Data in the second chart clearly shows the delays in urgent referrals waiting for treatment during and after the pandemic with both an increase in numbers referred and an increase in the proportion waiting longer.²⁷

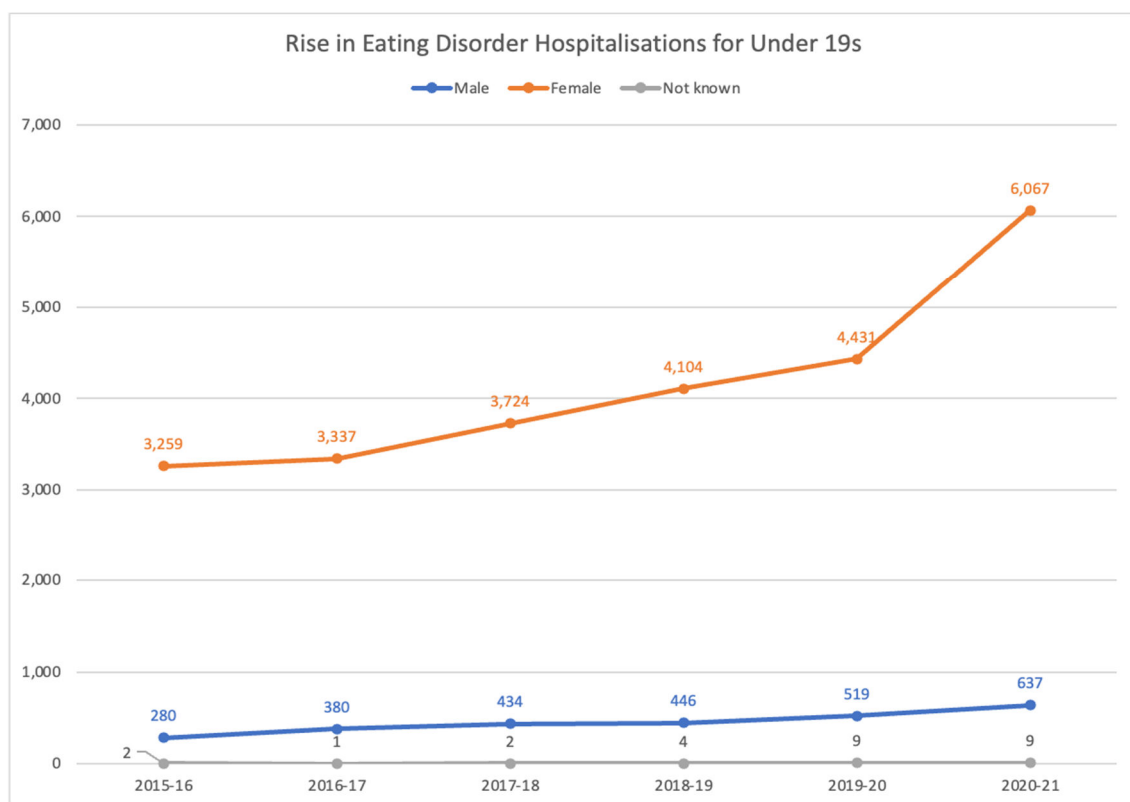


Figure 20. Rise in eating disorder hospitalisations for under-19s by gender

²⁵ *State of the Nation 2022: Children and Young People's Wellbeing.*

²⁶ 'Hospital Admissions for Eating Disorders - NHS Digital' <<https://digital.nhs.uk/supplementary-information/2021/hospital-admissions-for-eating-disorders-2015-2021>> [accessed 24 May 2023].

²⁷ 'Children and Young People with an Eating Disorder Waiting Times', *Nuffield Trust* <<https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/resource/children-and-young-people-with-an-eating-disorder-waiting-times>> [accessed 24 May 2023].

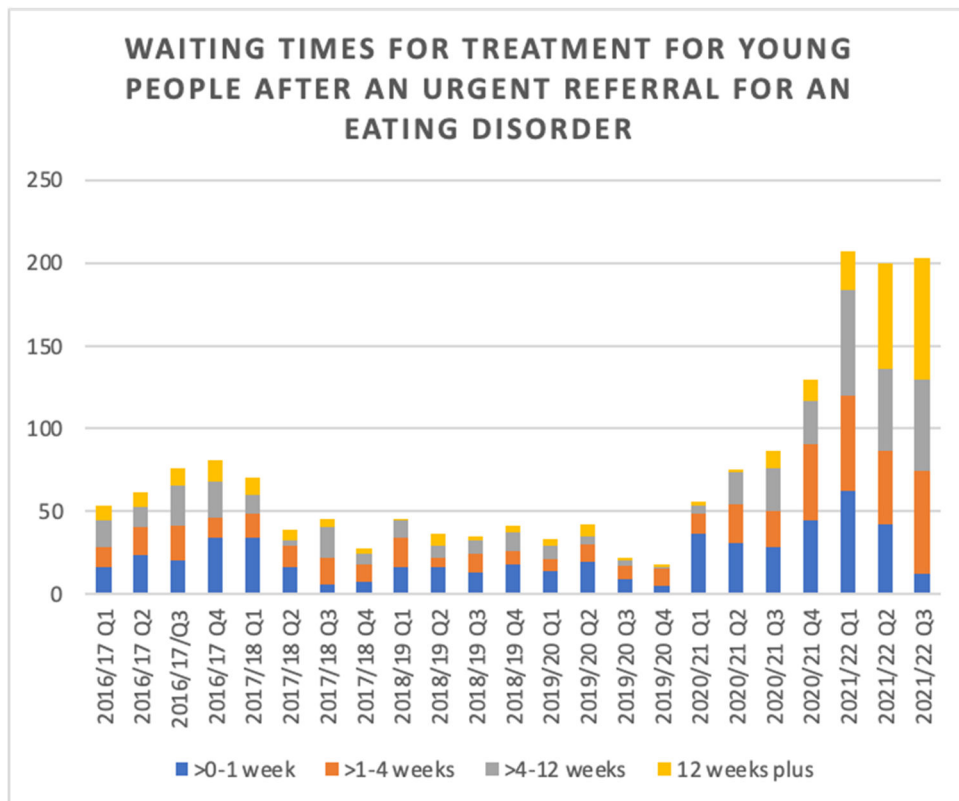


Figure 21. Waiting times for treatment for young people with an eating disorder

Frontline services are also struggling to cope with the increase in need for mental and physical health support for young people as a result of the pandemic. School Nurse numbers have fallen by around 35% to 2,000 in the last five years and there are calls from researchers to increase numbers by 11,000 over the next decade (less than half the local Government Association suggested target of one per secondary school and one per cluster of primary schools) to help the workforce cope with the increase in both number of and complexity of cases.²⁸

“Policymakers need to recognise and promote the integral role of school nurses in carrying out preventive public health work. This should be supported by a sufficient workforce though, and bolstering school nurse numbers will be key to meeting the increasingly complex needs of children and young people in the wake of the pandemic.”

Dr Georgia Cook, Oxford Brookes University²⁹

²⁸ Rachel Hall, 'Calls for 11,000 More School Nurses in UK as Children's Needs Grow', *The Guardian*, 2 May 2023, section Education <<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2023/may/02/calls-for-11000-more-school-nurses-in-uk-as-childrens-needs-grow>> [accessed 24 May 2023].

²⁹ Hall.

Part 3. Education and learning

Summary:

Most young people were happy to return to school after lockdowns in 2021 but there has been a significant rise in young people who are persistently absent compared with numbers before the pandemic.

Much reference has been made to the phrase 'catching up' and young people are worried about the education they have missed and the impact on their future exams.

During the first year of the pandemic school safeguarding referrals dropped but as young people have returned to school numbers of referrals rose sharply to slightly higher than pre-pandemic levels.

A growing body of evidence is suggesting that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are facing more negative consequences from the pandemic with respect to education and learning than their peers.

Returning to school

Most young people (81%) were happy to return to school after lockdowns in 2021 and 61% said they felt they belonged at their school either every day or most days. There was a strong positive relationship between those who said they belong and those who reported greater wellbeing. Specifically, those who reported high/very high happiness, life satisfaction, or worthwhileness were around seven times more likely to report that they felt like they belonged in their school every day, compared to those with low wellbeing on these measures. Those with low/very low anxiousness were at least twice as likely to report that they felt that they belonged in their school every day than those with medium or high anxiousness.³⁰

Young people with neurodevelopmental conditions who had home learning during the lockdowns had higher rates of school absence when schools reopened compared with those who had hybrid learning during school closures.³¹ Absence rates for all young people have also not returned to pre pandemic levels. The persistent absence rate (% of young people missing more than 10% attendance) in Feb 2023 was 23.4% compared with 5% in Autumn 2019. Around half of the 1.6 million young people who were persistently absent in 2021-22 were not absent due to illness. Reasons for persistent absence can be hugely varied and can range from external pressures on the family as a whole to specific individual things that pupils are facing. Persistent absence is more prevalent in children and young people who are in receipt of free school meals, for example. It is more prevalent in specific ethnic groups

³⁰ *State of the Nation 2022: Children and Young People's Wellbeing.*

³¹ Athanasia Kouroupa and others, 'The Association between Home Learning during COVID-19 Lockdowns and Subsequent School Attendance among Children with Neurodevelopmental Conditions', *Child: Care, Health and Development*, n/a.n/a/a <<https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.13113>>.

and for pupils with SEND, but particularly those pupils who have unidentified SEND or unmet SEND.³²

Young people are worried about ‘catching up’ on missed education and returning to school doesn’t seem to have allayed those worries. The State of the Nation 2021 report said that 39% of 11-16 year olds were very worried or worried about catching up on work³³ and there was little change to this number in 2022 with 43% also being worried about the impact of Covid on their exams.³⁴

After four years (2016-17 to 2019-20) of relatively stable numbers of safeguarding referrals made to children’s services by schools there was an initial drop in 2020-21 to 81,180 followed by a significant rise of 59% to 129,090 in 2021-22. 93% of teachers said the number of referrals in their school had increased.³⁵

There has been a reduction in time spent outside in school doing activities or lessons from 30% in 2021 to 23% in 2022.³⁶ There is no data to compare with before the pandemic so we don’t know if this is a continuing trend or whether time spent outside in 2021 was simply greater than usual due to school practices aiming to reduce the risk of the spread of Covid infection.

Inequalities and barriers to learning

As a result of differences in experiences of remote learning during lockdown, a growing body of evidence from the COSMO study is indicating that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds are facing greater negative consequences. Differences in experiences of remote learning during the three lockdowns initially showed a gap between the state and independent sector but by lockdown 3 this had changed to become a gap within the state sector. In 2020, 53% of teachers in the most deprived schools reported their belief that pupils were at least four months behind in curriculum learning compared to 15% of teachers in the least deprived schools.³⁷ Young people’s views followed a similar pattern with higher rates of those who thought they had fallen behind in areas of higher deprivation. Overall 80% of young people thought their progress had suffered as a result of the pandemic.³⁸

³² ‘Oral Evidence: Persistent Absence and Support for Disadvantaged Pupils’

<<https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/12789/html/>> [accessed 25 May 2023].

³³ ‘State of the Nation 2021 Children and Young People’s Wellbeing’.

³⁴ *State of the Nation 2022: Children and Young People’s Wellbeing*.

³⁵ NSPCC, ‘More than 90% of Teachers Say That Safeguarding Referrals Have Risen’, NSPCC, 2023

<<http://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2023/more-safeguarding-referrals-risen-childhood-day-2023/>> [accessed 25 May 2023].

³⁶ ‘The Children’s People and Nature Survey for England: 2022 Update’, GOV.UK

<<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-childrens-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-2022-update/the-childrens-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-2022-update>> [accessed 25 May 2023].

³⁷ Carl Cullinane and others, ‘Briefing No. 1 - Lockdown Learning’, COSMO, 2022

<<https://cosmostudy.uk/publications/lockdown-learning>> [accessed 26 April 2023].

³⁸ Rebecca Montacute and others, ‘Briefing No. 2 - Education Recovery and Catch Up’, COSMO, 2022

<<https://cosmostudy.uk/publications/education-recovery-and-catch-up>> [accessed 26 April 2023].

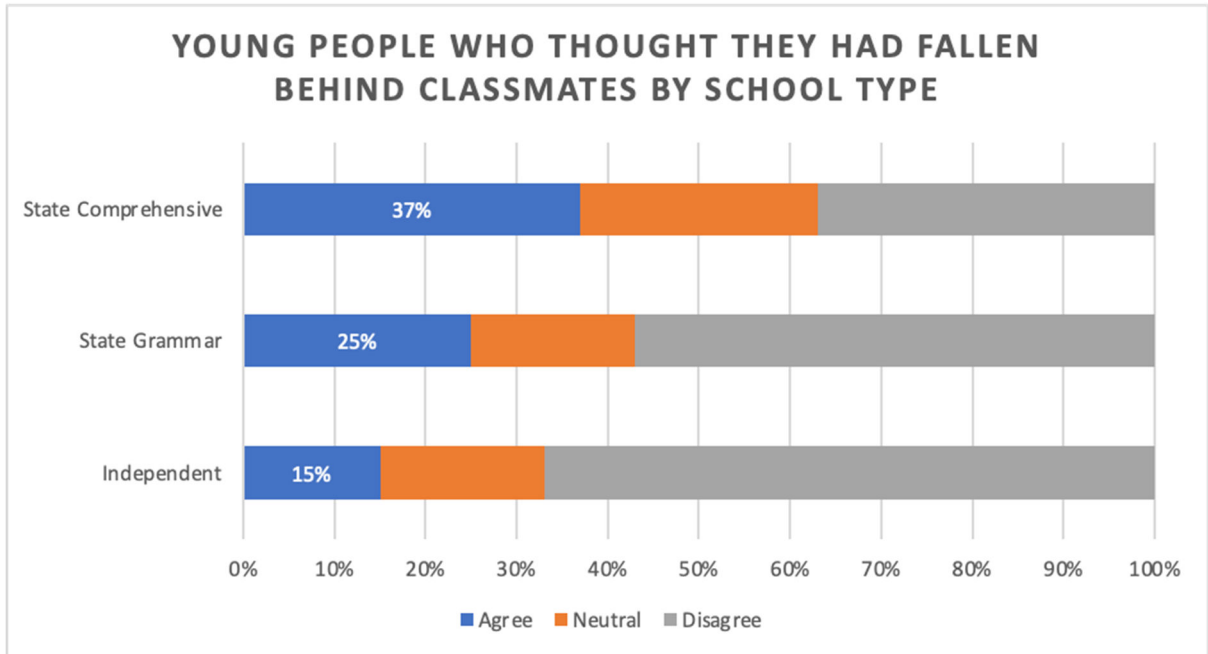


Figure 22. Young people who think they have fallen behind classmates by school type

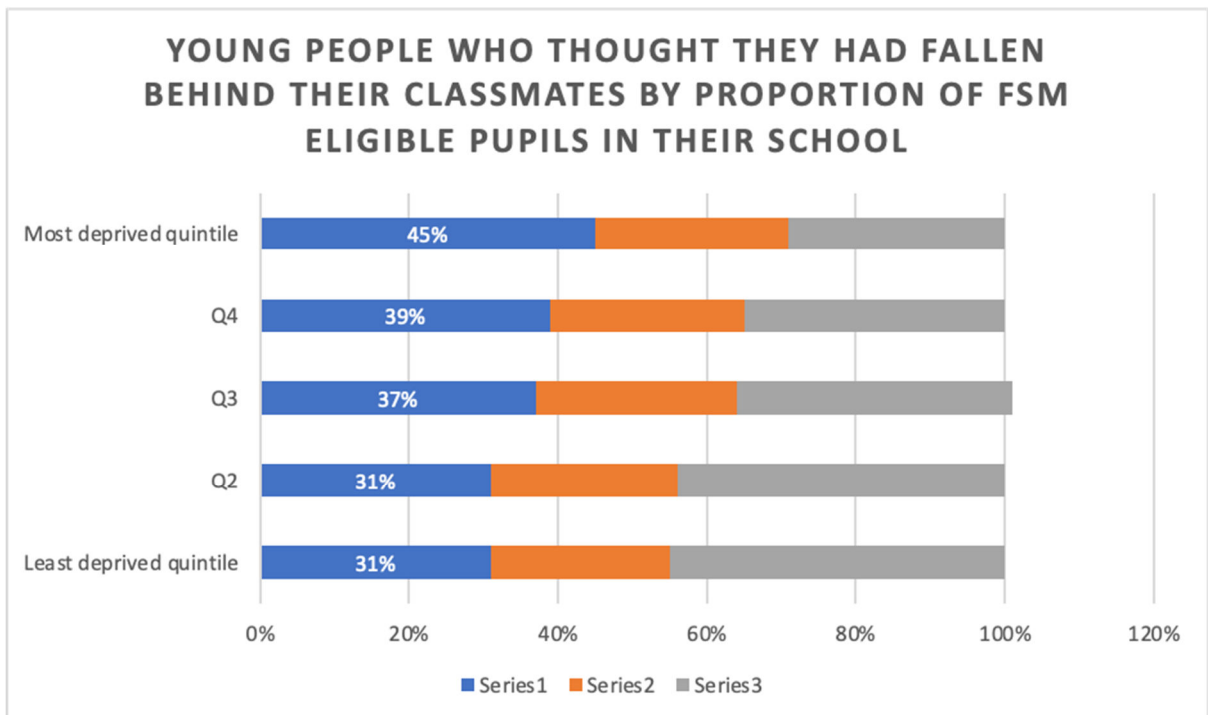


Figure 23. Young people who think they have fallen behind classmates by proportion of FSM eligible pupils in their school

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds faced a number of barriers throughout the pandemic. They studied for fewer days per week and hours per day, had less support at home and through private tuition, and felt more held back by school closures as a result. They did, however, receive more in-school tuition in autumn 2020. This group also benefited least from the cancellation of exams and the later switch to teacher-assessed grades (through the abandonment of the algorithm). Many of these inequalities existed in the system before the pandemic hit and there is a growing body of evidence that the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic will have been to exacerbate existing inequalities.³⁹

³⁹ Montacute and others.

Part 4. Socialisation

Summary:

There has been a slight increase in the number of young people participating in extracurricular activities compared to pre-pandemic levels, and an increase in the number of young people visiting more outside spaces in 2022 compared with 2021.

During the pandemic young people spent more time online and socialisation moved online but was often done in conjunction with other activities including gaming or using social media. More recently these patterns have changed again as content online becomes more 'professionalised' and young people become more self-conscious of what they post in the public domain.

There were significant national cuts to local youth services in the years preceding the pandemic leaving those organisations that remained in a vulnerable position when the pandemic hit.

Youth services have traditionally provided a lifeline for many young people but the cuts are resulting in a situation in which individuals are increasingly being left without local spaces where they can engage in positive activities that support their development, as youth services are forced to close their doors.

These cuts and discrepancies are having significant impacts on vulnerable young people increasing their risk of criminal exploitation and exclusion. Research highlights that the most effective interventions are those which are based and embedded in the community, rather than services that victims are 'taken to'.

Leisure time

More young people are participating in extracurricular activities than before the pandemic. Despite an obvious decline during the pandemic with only 53% participating in at least one activity in May 2021 – 83% of young people were participating in 2022.⁴⁰ This compares to pre-pandemic rates that were fairly stable (average 79.7% 2010-2018)⁴¹ and perhaps reflects a desire in more young people to engage with activities after experiencing lockdown restrictions.

Prior to the pandemic data from Natural England's Annual Survey showed that between 2013-2019 the number of young people spending time outside was declining slowly and there was a decline in unsupervised visits to outside spaces (i.e. without adults).⁴² During

⁴⁰ *State of the Nation 2022: Children and Young People's Wellbeing.*

⁴¹ 'An Unequal Playing Field: Extra-Curricular Activities, Soft Skills and Social Mobility', GOV.UK <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/extra-curricular-activities-soft-skills-and-social-mobility/an-unequal-playing-field-extra-curricular-activities-soft-skills-and-social-mobility>> [accessed 28 April 2023].

⁴² 'Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment MENE Children's Report 2018' <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/828838

the pandemic separate data from the Children and Nature Survey in 2020 reported that six in ten young people said they were spending less time outdoors compared to one in four spending more time. Unsurprisingly 81% said they spent less time outside with their friends.⁴³

In the State of the Nation Report in 2022 more girls than boys reported feeling lonely “often” both during and after the pandemic. Unfortunately comparable data before the pandemic wasn’t collected in previous State of the Nation Reports. The asterisk indicates a statistically significant difference between the genders.

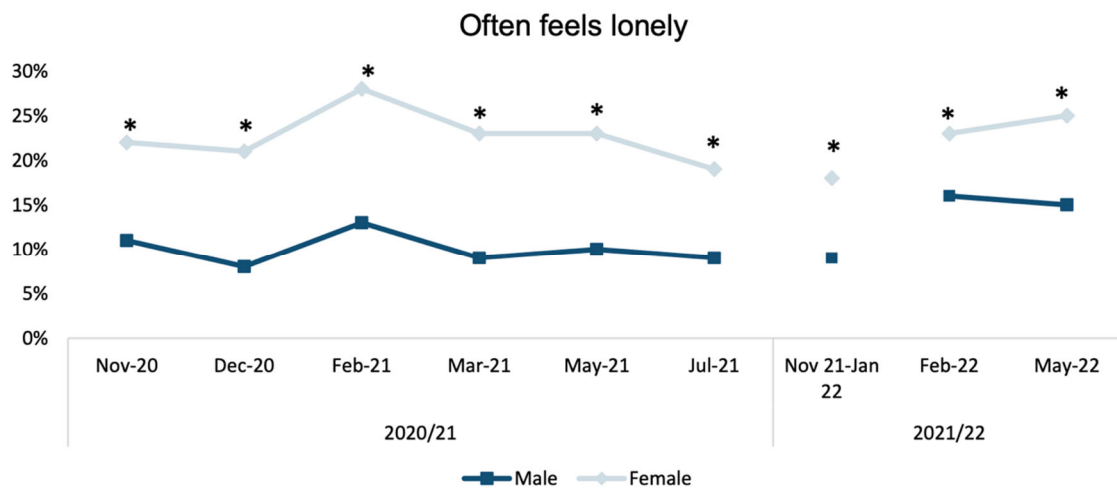


Figure 23. Young people who often feel lonely by gender (Taken from 43)

In 2022 time that young people spent outside was primarily in gardens and parks and grassy areas on streets. There has been an increase since 2021 in the percentage of young people spending time across all types of green spaces suggesting more young people are visiting more places than the previous year.⁴⁴

An Ofcom survey in August 2020 interviewed and tracked the behaviour of 14 young people aged 9-16 during May to July 2020.⁴⁵ While not a representative sample it does provide insights into how young people may have been behaving online early in the pandemic. Young people spent more time online and socialisation moved online, but was often done in conjunction with other activities including gaming or using social media and most were regularly multi-screening. They were using Tik Tok for several hours a day both to consume content and to upload their own videos. They watched the news in the beginning of the pandemic, but most disengaged over time, some due to feeling anxious and some because

/Monitor_of_Engagement_with_the_Natural_Environment__MENE__Childrens_Report_2018-2019_rev.pdf> [accessed 28 April 2023].

⁴³ 'The People and Nature Survey for England: Children’s Survey (Experimental Statistics)', GOV.UK <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-child-data-wave-1-experimental-statistics/the-people-and-nature-survey-for-england-childrens-survey-experimental-statistics>> [accessed 28 April 2023].

⁴⁴ 'The Children’s People and Nature Survey for England’.

⁴⁵ 'Children’s Media Lives Life in Lockdown.Pdf’.

they lost interest. Subsequent surveys found that in 2022 young people were creating and posting less content themselves and spending more time consuming 'professionalised' content than in previous years.⁴⁶ Tik Tok was the most popular platform while on YouTube 'commentary' style content where creators reference, challenge or stir up rivalry with other influencers was increasingly popular. The line between fictional drama and factual documentary has become increasingly blurred. Young people's social interactions mainly occurred within chat functions of the apps as they have become increasingly self-conscious about how they portray themselves in public online spaces.

Youth clubs and facilities

There were significant national cuts to local youth services in the years preceding the pandemic leaving those organisations that remained in a vulnerable position when the pandemic hit. From 2010/11 to 2018/19 annual Local Authority spending had reduced by £959 million, equivalent to a cut of 71%. A UK Youth survey in March 2020 reported that 81% of youth organisations anticipated they would have to cut services and almost a third predicted having to make redundancies.⁴⁷ Further research by UK Youth indicated that almost a year later almost two thirds of organisations were at risk of closure within the next 12 months while a similar number had seen an increase in demand for their services.⁴⁸ When looking across England, young people in the West Midlands and the North East have lost the most when it comes to youth services provided by their local authority. Local authorities in the West Midlands have cut spending on youth services by 80% since 2010/11, while in the North East cuts over the same period amounted to 76%. Young people living in the East of England and inner London have fared the best. However, even in these areas, the annual spend on youth services has been reduced by 62% and 63% respectively since 2010/11. Youth services have traditionally provided a lifeline for many young people but the cuts are resulting in a situation in which individuals are increasingly being left without local spaces where they can engage in positive activities that support their development, as youth services are forced to close their doors.

Results from the most recent National Youth Sector Census found that within these regions there is a further disparity in the amount and type of provision available to young people dependent on where they live.⁴⁹

- Non-uniformed VCS organisations are nearly twice as likely to operate in the most deprived postcodes and when they do they are more likely to be providing a wider range of services and support.
- Twice as much provision was found to be in the most affluent areas as opposed to the most deprived areas.

⁴⁶ 'Children's Media Lives 2023'.

⁴⁷ 'UK-Youth-Covid-19-Impact-Report-.Pdf' <<https://www.ukyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/UK-Youth-Covid-19-Impact-Report-.pdf>> [accessed 26 May 2023].

⁴⁸ U. K. Youth, 'UK Youth Report Reveals the Impact of COVID-19 on Youth Services', *UK Youth*, 2021 <<https://www.ukyouth.org/2021/02/uk-youth-report-reveals-the-impact-ofCovid-19-on-youth-services/>> [accessed 26 May 2023].

⁴⁹ 'National Youth Sector Census: First Report – NYA' <<https://www.nya.org.uk/national-youth-sector-census-first-report/>> [accessed 26 May 2023].

- There are twice as many buildings purpose-built for, or dedicated towards, young people in affluent areas.
- Charities are also more likely to operate in areas of higher deprivation compared to faith groups. More than a quarter (27%) of charities operate in England's most disadvantaged areas, as opposed to one in six (16%) of faith groups.

Crime and risky behaviours

These cuts and discrepancies are having significant impacts on vulnerable young people. According to a National Youth Agency report in 2021 on County Lines activity "The patchwork provision of youth services has left young people vulnerable and prey to gangs, without a safe space in their communities, among friends with trusted adults and trained youth workers. The support young people receive remains inconsistent and often insufficient....to stay 'one step ahead' as gangs and local dealers adapt their business model, to recruit and exploit other young people, requires the safety-net of open-access youth services."⁵⁰

They go on to suggest that young people need safe spaces in their communities, to gain trust and disclose their problems or ask for help, and that where there is open-access youth work – in community spaces – supported by detached, street-based youth workers, exploitation will be lower.

Research into the impacts of the pandemic on County Lines activity found that while Law enforcement Officers were "enthusiastic in their perceived ability to adapt to lockdown" there were huge frustrations in those who worked directly with young people regarding the increased vulnerability of some young people to exploitation, particularly through social media platforms and the decline in engagement from young people with whom they had previously built trust and rapport.⁵¹

According to a literature review in 2021 the most common group targeted are males aged 15-17, however some children are being recruited and exploited from as young as 11. The authors report that the most effective interventions are those which are based and embedded in the community, rather than services that victims are 'taken to'. They also highlight the value of local volunteers and youth workers saying that those based in the same communities as the people who are at risk are better placed to assess the problems facing them and so are better equipped to deal with them. Community based youth services provide what they describe as "reachable moments" to provide young people with support to exit County Lines involvement as well as prevent initial participation.⁵²

Other research in 2021 highlighted the inequalities in socialisation experiences during the pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, there was an increase in leisure time for many young people, but a reduction in leisure opportunities more generally. Before 2020, there were a

⁵⁰'Between the Lines – NYA' <<https://www.nya.org.uk/resource/between-the-lines/>> [accessed 26 May 2023].

⁵¹ Ben Brewster and others, 'Covid-19 and Child Criminal Exploitation in the UK: Implications of the Pandemic for County Lines', *Trends in Organized Crime*, 2021 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12117-021-09442-x>>.

⁵² 'County Lines (Literature Review)', *Interventions Alliance*, 2021 <<https://interventionsalliance.com/county-lines-literature-review/>> [accessed 26 May 2023].

variety of inexpensive and often free activities available and engaged with such as hanging out in the park/on the streets. During lockdowns access to these spaces was prohibited and vigorously policed. As the primary means of young people's participation in partying moved to virtual and/or expensive COVID-secure physical spaces, the exclusion of the most disadvantaged was perpetuated. The most disadvantaged young people have always been in need of safe, free and positive spaces to spend time and the researchers suggest that these young people were most exposed to risk of criminalisation, stigmatisation and exclusion as a result of the loss of these spaces, whether formal or informal.⁵³

⁵³ Nicholas Woodrow and Karenza Moore, 'The Liminal Leisure of Disadvantaged Young People in the UK Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Journal of Applied Youth Studies*, 4.5 (2021), 475–91 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s43151-021-00064-2>>.

Part 5. Hope and certainty

Summary

A significant proportion of young people are still worried about new illnesses/pandemics in 2022.

Young people say that the pandemic has led to them changing their future career plans and a significant proportion feel anxious about their future on a daily basis. Disadvantaged young people are more likely to think their future will be negatively impacted.

It isn't all negative however, while just over half of young people in one survey say that the pandemic has made them feel less certain about their future, a similar proportion say it has made them more resilient.

During the pandemic LGBT+ and transgender young people were less likely to feel optimistic about the future than non-LGBT+ and non-transgender young people.

The pandemic has had a significant impact on young people's perceptions of their futures and the hope and aspiration they carry for their adult lives.

"I feel that my generation is still emerging from a collective identity crisis. We were so young when Covid hit that we didn't have clear identities. When all our routines were taken away, we were left to explore who we were in a vacuum, and [think about] what we were supposed to be doing in a world where suddenly there was no clear right and wrong, where there had been certainty before.

But I also think my generation is exhausted. Just trying to gather ourselves together is exhausting. Picking up the pieces in this economic and social climate is exhausting. We're on permanent catch-up."

Jess Paine (Age 23)⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Amelia Hill, "'We're on Permanent Catch-up': How Covid Has Changed Young Britons' Lives", *The Guardian*, 29 January 2023, section Society <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jan/29/were-on-permanent-catch-up-how-Covid-has-changed-young-britons-lives>> [accessed 30 May 2023].

What are young people worried about?

According to the State of the Nation Reports young people were *less worried* in 2022 compared with 2021 about:

- New illnesses/pandemics - 37% vs 42%
- Unemployment - 24% vs 29%

They were *more worried* about:

- Refugee and Migrant Crisis - 32% vs 26%

And *still worried* about:

- Environment – 41% vs 40%
- Crime – 32% vs 33%
- Inequality – 32% vs 33%

It is perhaps surprising that the numbers saying they worry about unemployment went down from 2021 to 2022 given that almost 20% of young people age 7-16 in the 2022 State of the Nation report said they had experienced a drop in household income in the last 12 months.⁵⁵

Impact of economic disadvantage

In the COSMO study almost two thirds of young people said they have changed their future education plans as a result of the pandemic and 60% said they have changed career plans.⁵⁶ Females, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, young people with long Covid, those who were asked to shield due to ill health or economic disadvantage caused by the pandemic and those attending state schools are more likely to say the pandemic has impacted their future plans. Young people are also worried about their future employment prospects. Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were especially less likely to access high quality information, guidance and advice on post-18 education options during school closures – partly due to the digital divide. and were subsequently less equipped to make decisions about their future. The pandemic seems to have exacerbated pre-existing differences in access to information, advice and guidance (IAG), education and career aspiration. Arguably young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are even more in need of high quality IAG than those who attend private schools who tend to have more support from family and friends and access to wider networks. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds had lower wellbeing, and higher levels of anxiety about the future caused by the pandemic and were more likely to report that they would take any job that came along after university.⁵⁷

The Prince's Trust Class of Covid report found that 49% of young people reported feeling anxious about their future on a daily basis.⁵⁸ 42% of those from lower income backgrounds

⁵⁵ *State of the Nation 2022: Children and Young People's Wellbeing.*

⁵⁶ James Yarde and others, 'Briefing No. 3 - Future Plans and Aspirations', *COSMO*, 2022 <<https://cosmostudy.uk/publications/future-plans-and-aspirations>> [accessed 26 April 2023].

⁵⁷ Jake Anders and others, 'Inequalities in Young Peoples' Educational Experiences and Wellbeing during the Covid-19 Pandemic', *UCL Working Paper 21-08* <<https://repec-cepeo.ucl.ac.uk/cepeow/cepeowp21-08.pdf>>.

⁵⁸ 'New Research from The Prince's Trust Reveals Almost Half of Young People in the UK Feel Anxious about Their Future on a Daily Basis | News and Views | About The Trust | The Prince's Trust'.

do not think their job prospects will ever recover from the pandemic compared to 29% of those from more affluent backgrounds. 51% feel less certain about their future than prior to the pandemic but 49% say the pandemic has made them more resilient. It should be noted that these were not mutually exclusive choices in the survey and a young person may well have said they feel less certain about the future but also feel more resilient.

Variations by gender/sexuality

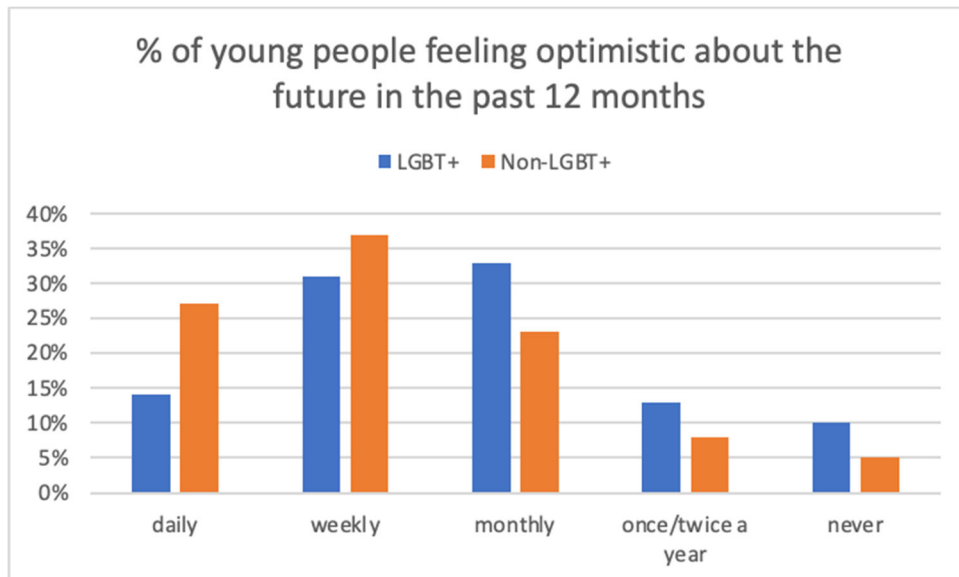
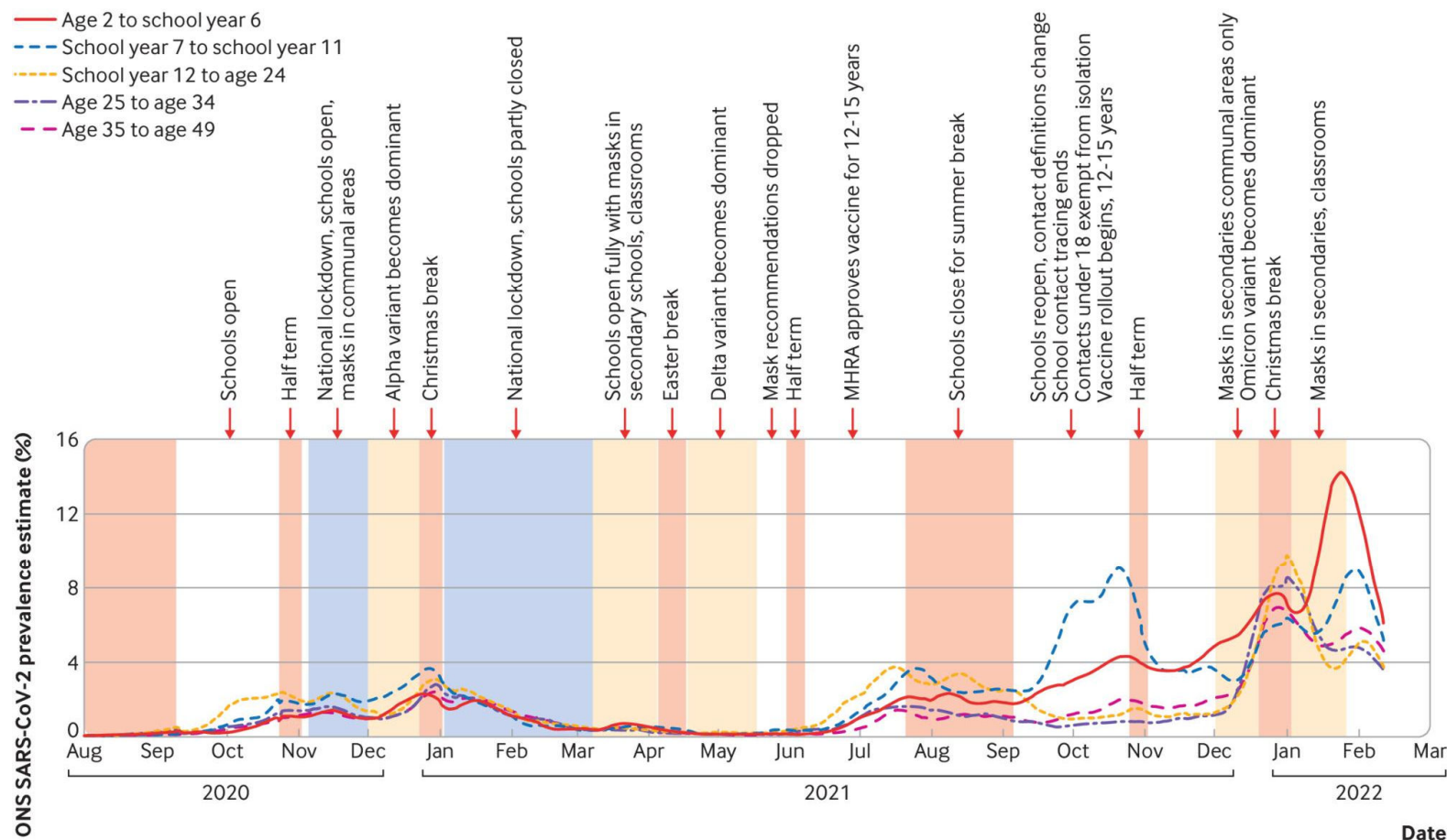


Figure 24. Percentage of young people feeling optimistic about the future in the past 12 months

Data from the Just Like Us Report in 2021 suggests that LGBT+ young people are less likely to frequently feel optimistic about the future.⁵⁹ Only 14% of LGBT+ young people say they have felt optimistic about the future on a daily basis, compared to almost double the number of non-LGBT+ young people (27%). One in ten (10%) LGBT+ young people have never felt optimistic about the future in the past 12 months, twice the proportion of non-LGBT+ young people who say the same. Transgender young people are also less likely to feel optimistic about the future. 15% say they have never felt optimistic about the future in the past 12 months, compared to 6% of non-transgender young people. Just 19% of transgender young people report feeling optimistic about the future on a weekly basis, compared to 36% of their non-transgender peers.

⁵⁹ 'Just-Like-Us-2021-Report-Growing-Up-LGBT.Pdf'.

Appendix 1. Timeline of Covid-19 prevalence correlated to school restrictions⁶⁰



SARS-CoV-2 prevalence measured in Office for National Statistics Infection Survey from March 2021 to 2022 and correlation with school opening. Orange highlighted regions show periods of school closure. Yellow highlighted areas show periods during which masks were required in school either in communal areas or classrooms. Blue highlighted areas show periods of lockdown. Data for adults aged ≥ 50 years not shown for ease of readability, but prevalence was lower than for school age children consistently.

⁶⁰ Deepti Gurdasani and others, 'Covid-19 in the UK: Policy on Children and Schools', *BMJ*, 378 (2022), e071234 <<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2022-071234>>.