



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

The impact of COVID-19 on Education, Food and Play/Leisure and Related Adaptations of Children and Young People in England

***PANEX-Youth* Work Packages 2 and 3 Report: Mapping and Key Stakeholder Interviews**

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Executive Summary

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. It can be read alongside the WP2 Global and National Mapping exercise report, which is available here: <https://panexyouth.com/home-2/resources/>

This report builds upon an extensive review of reports and literature on how COVID-19 affected young people (aged 10-24) 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 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 of national and local governments to provide for the needs of vulnerable young people during the pandemic.

Following the above review, the team conducted the next phase of data collection (WP3), aiming to situate and identify in more detail what had been the key impacts of pandemic-related policy towards the food, education, play/leisure nexus of issues facing young people during and after COVID-19, in England. It also sought to examine what policy/programmes/initiatives were developed, and how local places mattered (including home life/household contexts). To do so, we identified non-governmental and non-profit organisations that played a key role in supporting young people and/or in assessing the impacts of the pandemic on them.

While looking at England as a whole, we also zoomed on West Midlands/Birmingham. The West Midlands was one of the hardest-hit parts of the UK during COVID-19. The region includes some of the most deprived neighbourhoods and a younger than average population. The intent of the interviews was twofold: 1) to understand each organisation's response to supporting young people during/after COVID-19, and 2) from the organisation's views, to identify what adaptations and tactics young people used to deal with the challenges

that COVID-19 and associated lockdowns presented. Interview questions focused on the following four primary themes: The role of the organisation and how they engaged with young people, the impact of the pandemic on the food/education/play-leisure nexus, Vulnerability, Place, Social Networks and Adaptation, Legacy and Ongoing Crisis. All interviews were recorded, and our research fully conformed with UCL's ethical guidance. The interviews were transcribed, coded and analysed, with 37 core themes extracted.

The main **findings** from the report (divided into the four sections of the full report) are as follows.

1. COVID-19 and national Government responses as a catalyst for furthering socio-economic inequalities

1.1 At the national level, Governmental policies and responses to the diverse, **localized impacts** of COVID-19 were often not adequate. In the face of local need, local organisations, authorities and communities came together to provide often *ad hoc* support – particularly aimed at vulnerable families.

1.2 COVID-19 and associated lockdowns **increased vulnerabilities and socio-economic inequalities**. These inequalities were felt intersectionally – with, for instance, monetary poor young people from ethnic minorities being particularly hard-hit. COVID-19 also combined with a range of other crises (including climate change and increased living costs following the war in Ukraine) to mean compound challenges. An increased number of families sought help during COVID-19 (for instance in accessing food), with job losses and financial strains prevalent amongst marginalized and vulnerable young people.

The acceleration and combination of everyday pressures on individual families, combined with increased socio-economic inequalities had a snowballing impact on four major components of young people's lives: their ability to learn and access relevant training and skills, their ability to access healthy and nutritious food, their ability to be able to exercise and socialise (i.e. access play and leisure) and their ability to continue developing their confidence and be mentally well.

2. Impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable young people's access to education and related adaptations

The pandemic dramatically impacted access to education, which is intrinsically connected to access to food, for vulnerable young people, but also to play, socialisation, welfare and overall mental wellbeing. Impacts unfolded in line with other vulnerabilities including the digital divide and home conditions that made learning challenging – with all of these factors having in many cases devastating impacts on young people's learning and life trajectories.

2.1 Education was the most-affected sector with long-lasting cross-sectoral impacts for young people's lives and wellbeing. COVID-19 responses in the education sector felt confused and disorganized due to the unprecedented nature of the crisis, with most schools and teachers being unprepared. Various schemes and policies introduced by the government had unequal impacts. State schools' core budgets were however not increased during the pandemic; many had to use their other budgets to fill funding shortfalls, or used fundraising to fill gaps (for example to purchase IT equipment).

Policy responses significantly impacted children and young people's abilities to continue learning. Several challenges emerged such as differential loss of learning spanning across primary, secondary, vocational skills

4.1 Play was not a priority for government spending and policies either before or during the pandemic.

Funding support packages focused on leisure, and especially sport and sports facilities (including those also aimed at adults). Organisations such as playgrounds did not receive funding, despite playing a key role during the pandemic for vulnerable young people (providing places to go but also food and educational resources). This demonstrated a lack of understanding of the role of some of these places, as support and community hubs.

4.2 The lack of play/leisure options had a detrimental impact on young people's development and health.

Not being able to play and have leisure was connected with not being allowed to socialise and interact with others. Closures and social distancing restrictions in schools, playgrounds, leisure centres and other spaces, as well as limited opportunities within homes, meant that play and leisure were particularly curtailed for young people living in small homes, without gardens.

In general, vulnerable children (at least those with less supervision and care provided by adults) tend to play outside the home and have dedicated times and spaces. This ability was impacted due to mobility restrictions and their amount of play was reduced during lockdowns and due to social distancing – as were organized activities and clubs that provide a

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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 5 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.

Ambitions

PANEX-Youth aimed to understand how young people have adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic and to assess the wider impact of such processes of adaptations. To do so, we adopted a nexus approach, focusing on the interconnections between three key elements of children and 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 children and young people.

The findings of the research aim to support 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 findings from this later stage of research will be published in a subsequent report.

T,p

of South Africa, RSA Government Gazette ; In addition, academic papers, press releases, multinational reports from INGOS (e.g. UN, UNESCO, UN Habitat, UNICEF,

As one of the four countries of the United Kingdom, England has distinct laws and policies governing education, play, and other aspects of children's lives. During COVID-19, each of the Governments of the UK's devolved nations (England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) operated restrictions and lockdowns in different ways. COVID-19 started to spread in the UK at the end of January 2020. The government was initially slow and reluctant to implement restrictions but shifted its approach completely at the end of March 2020 by enforcing a first stay-at-home order. In England, this first period of lockdown was followed by two further periods of national lockdown, combined with different COVID-19 alert levels in a variety of localities. National responses were hugely criticized for not being apt enough to tackle vulnerabilities and in effect enhanced intersectional burdens further.

Overall, consensus emerged from interviews that government policies were chaotic and not appropriate

1.1 The importance of localised responses

During the pandemic, the UK Government provided a range of emergency programmes that impacted directly or indirectly on young people and their households. These programmes included tax and spending measures to support households, which encompassed: (i) additional funding for the NHS, public services, and charities (£48.5 billion); (ii) measures to support businesses (£29 billion), including property tax holidays, direct grants for small firms and firms in the most-affected sectors, and compensation for sick leave; and (iii) increasing payments under the Universal Credit scheme and other benefits (Agarwal et al., 2022) to support vulnerable people (£8 billion). A furlough scheme was introduced allowing employers to furlough employees 80% of the hours they could not work (UK Parliament, 2021). Incentives and support were provided to encourage firms to hire and train 16-18 year-old apprentices (ibid). Critical workers' children and vulnerable children were allowed to attend schools but many missed out and remained at home (Roberts and Danechi, 2021).

1.2 Increased vulnerabilities and socio-economic inequalities

The pandemic affected individuals and families unequally with higher mortality rates among men, people with pre-existing conditions, and amongst monetary poor and particular ethnic groups. COVID-19 mortality was the highest among Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Black Caribbean groups (Raleigh, 2022). The pandemic also had multisectoral impacts, bringing an economic contraction, fluctuations in the labour market and a strain on poor households due to lockdown measures, the higher cost of living (which has persisted in the years following COVID-19 lockdowns) and a disruption in supply chains. COVID-19 was a major factor in a substantial drop in UK GDP, an inflation increase close to 2% between August 2020 and April 2021, reaching 7% in March 2022 and climbing to a staggering 11% in the last quarter of 2022 (combined with other factors, such as the war in the Ukraine). This dramatically affected vulnerable poor households, shifting many to severe poverty. The number of families seeking help increased significantly and this was observed by interviewees from all sectors (education, food, faith).

W
W
(School/College Representative,
29/02/2023)

The impact on youth unemployment was also significant. The numbers of 16-24 years old seeking employment doubled from March 2020 to 450,000 in mid-2021 (Youth Employment Group, 2021). When compared with other age groups the 18-24 years old bracket lost one third of its workforce whilst the 35-44 years old counterparts less than 15%; this evidenced a “U-shaped impact” due to the pandemic (Henehan, 2021).

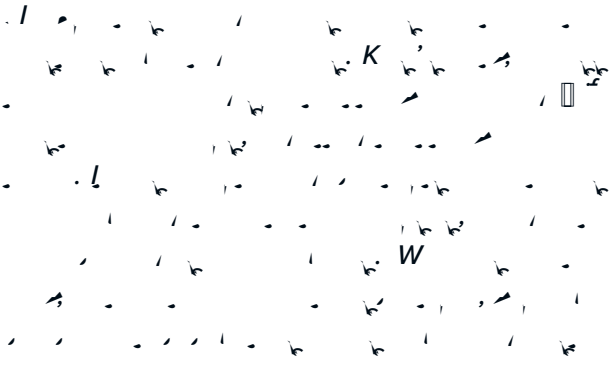
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2021,
() B
(Representative from a charit
(incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation
working across England to support disadvantaged
and vulnerable young people, 16/02/2023).

Some programmes were quite successful however – for example the ‘Kickstart Scheme’, which was considered as an effective response (N03, 16/02/2023). However, w 0.5 55.2756 443.0sc-rie w a o4

The pandemic dramatically impacted access to education, which is intrinsically connected to access to food, for vulnerable young people, but also to play, socialisation, welfare and overall mental wellbeing. Impacts unfolded in line with other vulnerabilities including the digital divide and home conditions that made learning challenging – with all of these factors having in many cases devastating impacts on young people’s learning and life trajectories.

2.1 Education as the most affected sector with long-lasting cross-





substantial guidance and nature and quality of learning materials that were provided were raised as key challenges by the young people and educational organisations we interviewed. In some schools, a community engagement approach was adopted with parents' online help centres, specific training programs and guidebooks introduced to reinforce the school-

Representative, 29/02/2023). (School/College

varied within ethnicity groups, for people in social

12 to support GCSEs and A-Level preparation (Howard et al., 2020). The cancellation of exams and the introduction of alternative grading scales were however criticized for disadvantaging students studying in more deprived areas, resulting in high-achieving students from historically low-achieving institutions being downgraded, and lower-achieving students from high-achieving institutions having their grades inflated (Finn et al., 2022). Adjustment made after these criticisms did not suffice to address those inequalities. The national Education Committee Institute raised the alarm immediately arguing that “north and the Midlands are doing worse than the south and disadvantaged pupils are doing worse than non-disadvantaged pupils, but very notably all pupils in more disadvantaged areas have a high likelihood of suffering severe learning loss. It is not only poor children; it is [also] non-poor children in disadvantaged areas” (Laws, 2020). Such disequilibrium were reiterated in March 2022: “it is clear that school closures have had a disastrous impact on children’s academic progress, with 2023 results reiterating this trend clearly highlighting a learning gap characterising a so-called Covid-19 generation” (House of Commons Education Committee, 2022). Such consequences were shared by some of the young people we interviewed testifying from the dramatic consequences of the pandemic on young people’s education but also life trajectories:

I... F... I... H... GCSE... GCSE... H... A'... H... H... H... P... (Young People Ambassador, 23/02/2023)

I... S... T...

S... S... A-... (Young People Ambassador, 26/05/2023)

(Young People Ambassador, 26/05/2023)

Gaps in learning affected all subject areas, even in priority topics such as English and Maths, despite ‘catch-up’ programmes. Studies showed that in November 2021, students remained behind Math and English skills by at least 2 months (Edge Foundation, 2021) and gaps persisted until January 2022 in mathematics, reading, languages and physical education (Ofsted, 2022). This was due to the decisions of schools to prioritise other types of support as eluded to earlier.

T... S... T... (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 30/03/2023)

(Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 30/03/2023)

Other curriculum areas, and especially the applied sciences and sports, were particularly negatively affected, with less than 70% coverage of the usual curriculum (Edge Foundation, 2021, Woodrow and Moore, 2021). Vocational courses (e.g. at Further Education Colleges) were also significantly disrupted (Stone, 2021).

V... (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working across England to support disadvantaged and vulnerable young people., 16/02/2023).

Disruptions also arose from a lack of attention and understanding, at government level, of the nature of vocational exams.

O... UK... (GCSE)... BTEC... T...

BTEC
 (Representatives from a charity
 (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation
 working in the education sector across England,
 17/02/2023).

Students enrolled in vocational courses were less affected by the digital divide as many had been provided with a computer prior to the pandemic and also benefited from bursaries to purchase kits and materials. However, vocational training was significantly impacted by the difficulty of learning practical skills online.

T
 (Representatives
 from a not-for profit social enterprise focusing
 on youth education and youth employment,
 30/01/2023).

Later on during the pandemic, significant resource-demanding adjustments were needed to accommodate social distancing requirements:

T
 (School/College Representative,
 04/05/2023)

Overall, the impact of the pandemic on young people's education was dramatic, fostering for those living in monetary poor conditions an increase in socio-economic vulnerabilities with long-lasting impacts. While our study focused primarily on children above 10 years, it was flagged up during our interviews that online learning was also very difficult for younger children. Beyond long-lasting learning gaps, the pandemic impacted young people's mental health with these impacts continuing post-lockdown, as noted by one of the social workers we interviewed:

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 GCSE
 (Representative from a charity
 (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation
 working across England to support disadvantaged
 and vulnerable young people., 16/02/2023).

Lack of social interactions, stress, isolation, and missing out of key stages of their lives were recurrent issues mentioned by interviewees.

C
 COVID-19
 W
 L
 T
 (Representative from
 Local and Combined Authorities - Children/Youth
 Services, 06/06/2023).

Ongoing challenges facing the education sector are also linked to the consequences of the pandemic for the teachers and headteachers workforce who themselves have suffered greatly.

A
 A
 T
 COVID-19
 (Representative from Local and
 Combined Authorities - Children/Youth Services,
 06/06/2023).

Educational challenges, immediate and long-lasting impacts were unfortunately not isolated from other daily pressures, and this includes access to food.

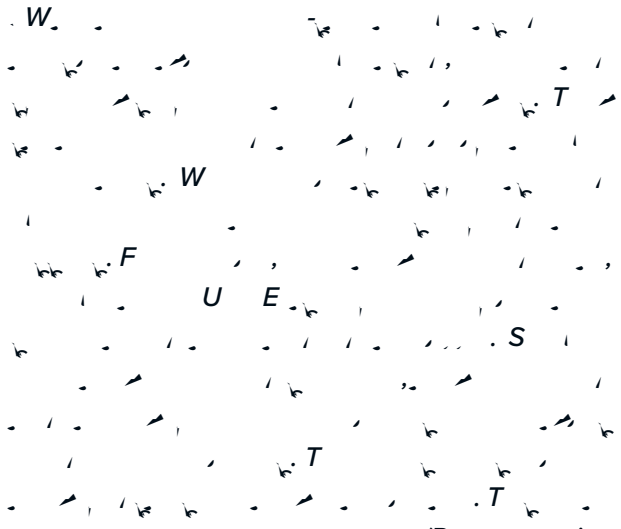
et al., 2021), food was distributed to young people but also to their families, as an emergency response.

S
T

(Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 30/03/2023)

Through solidarity, dedication and an increasing number of volunteers coming forward, non-government organisations were able to set up collection points, provide door-to-door delivery, and keep food pantries open for the community while applying the rules of safe distancing (Oncini, 2021). Free food parcels were delivered through very diverse, and locally-based arrangements, as

into consuming unhealthy items, particularly during lockdowns (Jia et al., 2021).



(Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the food policy and health food sector, 10/02/2023).

Relationship to food became problematic, even if it also led to a range of experimentations, with positive outcomes for young people.

3.3 Experiencing food

At household levels, the combination of lockdown and restricted mobilities meant that individual self-sufficiency in producing and preparing food increased. This was combined with a change in eating habits driven by financial rationales, typically stricter budgeting, less impulse buying, preferences given for non-perishable and inexpensive food, and a reduction in meat and dairy consumption (Hassen, Kapetanaki and Spotswood, 2022, Oncini, 2021). In some cases, it also transformed the families' attitudes and practices towards food, with an increase interest in cooking, experimenting with new recipes and consuming non-perishable food products such as pasta and rice (Hassen, Kapetanaki and Spotswood, 2022). Interest towards cooking came as a form of play and was used by play workers online:



(Representative from a research institution with

specific expertise in education, food and health and children/ young people, 31/01/2023)

The change in habits did extend to the young population with an increasing interest to grow food hence generating a self-sufficient adaptation (Lasko-Skinner and Sweetland, 2021). Here the use of vouchers did indirectly contribute in empowering young people to buy their own products, cook and feel more independent.

Online videos posted on Facebook promoted cooking activities to engage communities' solidarity and in some instances created a "play book and food book" targeting the young population with home-cooked food ideas (Bayes et al., 2021). Organisations and charities specialising in food and healthy living stepped in to provide such resources.



(Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the food policy and health food sector, 10/02/2023).

4. Impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable young people's access to play /leisure and related adaptations

Play and leisure were by far the most ignored aspects of young people's lives in terms of the national government response, with little consideration given to it and with the longer-term impact on young people's development and mental wellbeing. For young people living in monetary poor conditions, such restrictions on their everyday lives were even harsher as

T ... *C* ... *A* ...
S ... (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the food policy and health food sector, 10/02/2023).

As for accessing education and food, such challenges triggered further vulnerability, with longer-term consequences.

4.1. Play: a non-priority for pandemic policies

Play and leisure are fairly well recognised as children's rights in England. In January 2009, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) published the Play and Leisure Policy Statement that set out how children and young people's right to rest, play and join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and leisure activities could be promoted. However funding to the play sector shrank dramatically in the past 10 years.

W ... 2010, ... *S* ... *P* ...
 (Representative from a research institution with

specific expertise in education, food and health and children/ young people, 31/01/2023)

This was reflected in the support provided by the government to play and leisure policies during the pandemic. The government provided £1 billion split into three packages. The first sub-package was the Sports Survival Package (£600 million). It aimed to aid grassroots sports and protect the spectator type of sports in England. The second sub-package (£270 million) was directed towards supporting community sports centres and clubs by Sport England. The third sub-package (£100 million) was given to local authority leisure centres (DCMS, 2021) and aimed at supporting the reopening of public sector leisure facilities, preserving sustainable operations and adequate delivery of activities that were not provided for the public in private clubs (e.g. swimming), sustaining a healthy lifestyle across England and ensuring that facilities could fully or partially re-opened by end of March 2021 (Sport England, 2021).

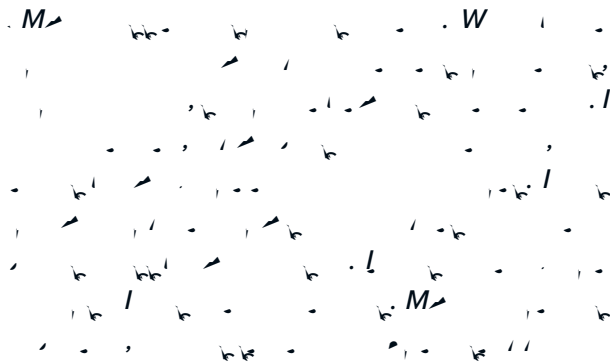
Funding play and leisure was hence primarily focused on sport activities. No funding was allocated to the play sector per se and typically to the support of formal and informal play places. Organisations from parks and park trusts (for outdoor playgroups) to sport organisations and youth clubs but also adventure playgrounds remained outside of government supporting schemes (King, 2021). These organisations did not receive funding despite playing a key role during the pandemic for vulnerable young people (including through providing food and educational resources). This demonstrated a lack of understanding of the role of some of these places, as support and community hubs.

W ... *K* ...

W
(Representative
from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks)
organisation working in the play provision sector,
22/02/2023)

Play organisations managed to sustain their activities
and support towards young people by adapting their
activities and engage with food provision.

Housing and socio-economic conditions here played a key role in restricting the ability of young people to continue exercising:



(Youth Ambassador, 27/04/2023).

Daily sports routines and exercises were altered and needed to be adapted to confined spaces (ibid.). Young people's physical activity was reduced by 68% (Spacey, Hatton and Crawshaw, 2021). In general, vulnerable children (at least those with less supervision and care provided by adults) tend to play outside their home and have dedicated times and spaces (Casey and McKendrick, 2022). This ability was impacted due to mobility restrictions and their amount of play was reduced during lockdowns and due to social distancing. Similarly, collective and group activities either disappeared or shrank due to social distancing (Spacey, Hatton and Crawshaw, 2021). This included adapting play at schools in periods of social distancing.



(Representative from Local and Combined Authorities – Children/ Youth Services, 05/06/2023).

During periods of lockdowns, some schools offered the possibility to parents of children with learning difficulties to use playground facilities, during school opening hours.

As a result, isolation increased, impacting self-confidence and abilities to engage with the others in all types of situations.



(Representative from Local and Combined Authorities – Children/Youth Services, 06/06/2023)

Socialising outside being restricted, the bedroom became the primary play area, heightening the significance of e-gaming (Casey and McKendrick, 2022). For many young people, play and social interactions shifted online with 92% of 16 to 24 years old reported engaging in online gaming (Ofcom, 2021). While this led to significant negative impacts, it also played a key role in young people's resilience and ability to sustain forms of social interactions.



(Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the play provision sector, 15/03/2023).

Key here was mental wellbeing. However, again, not all were equal in accessing online play due to the issue of the digital divide and cost of data. Young people experiencing intersectional disadvantages were more vulnerable to digital-leisure exclusions (Woodrow and Moore, 2021).

4.3 Alternative forms of indoor/ outdoor playing

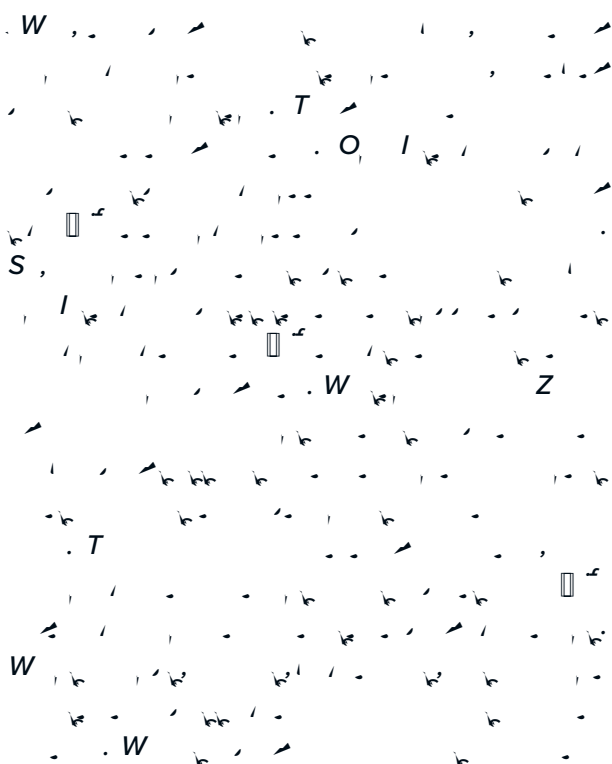
Despite the above trends, as the pandemic progressed, several play adaptations occurred across England where children reclaimed neighbourhood streets and re-appropriated them as spaces of interactive play (Russell and Stenning, 2021). Even if these processes were not implemented on a larger scale or supported by local authorities (e.g. through play streets schemes for example), creativity and adaptability emerged in various temporary small-scale adaptations of outdoor spaces and community streets. For example, the use of non-traditional playgrounds such as woods, and temporary activities led by parents, volunteers or by play workers, such as chalk hopscotches, play trails, colouring houses windows brought intergenerational play to the fore.





(Representative a private compan speciali ed in supporting pla provision, 9/02/2023)

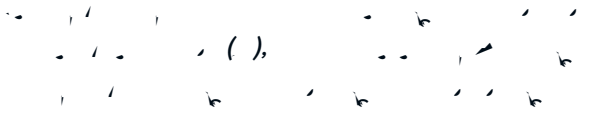
Playworkers and play organisations remained engaged in developing innovative ways of gathering children to play online (King, 2020); through various support measures, they also arranged the delivery of play and food parcels to those in need.



(Representative a private compan speciali ed in supporting pla provision, 9/02/2023)

The acknowledgment that poverty and deprivation were also affecting play was also at the core of schools but also local authorities' work. Many schools organised the distribution of books, papers and colouring pens, while also handing out food and learning materials. Similarly, local authorities and social workers used their budget to purchase play items and distribute them to

the most vulnerable families. In some cases they joined forces with other groups to fill gaps:



(Representative from Local and Combined Authorities Children/Youth Services, 06/06/2023).

"... as the pandemic progressed, several play adaptations occurred across England where children reclaimed neighbourhood streets and re-appropriated them as spaces of interactive play."

Faiths organisations also stepped in and included play sessions as part of the support provided to their communities:



(Representative from Diocesan and Faith groups, 16/03/2023).

Such collective efforts demonstrated how, at local levels, play and leisure were considered as crucial components of young people's development leading to significant efforts. Here, the role of social workers

is to be noted. They were also the first to be able to socially interact with young people.

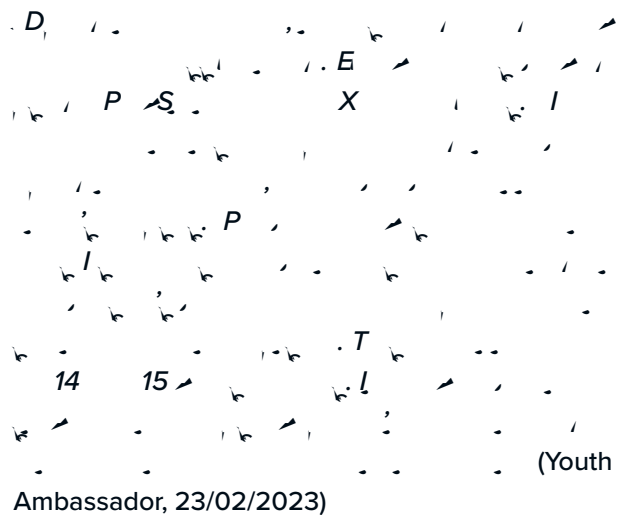


Such mobilisations allowed alternative arrangements to provide support to young people in retaining elements of social interactions and play in their lives.

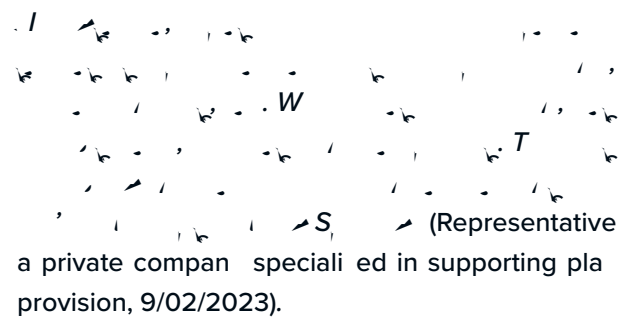
4.4. Playing by going around regulations

The play and leisure of children and young people living in monetary poor households were impacted further due to the combination of three key factors: limited access and poor quality of green and public spaces around their homes; limited opportunities to play at home (due to overcrowding, no garden or difficult family conditions); the digital divide restricting a shift to online playing/socialising and hence enhancing digital-leisure exclusions. The reduction of play, leisure and social interactions opportunities led to a range of adaptations based on versatility, and improvisations (which included in some instances bypassing authorities' regulations). Illicit and liminal leisure practices also increased.

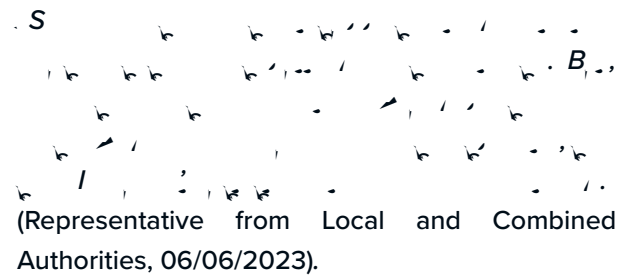
Many young people (teenagers and above) used public and semi-public spaces to meet despite restrictions, often facing the risk of fines (Woodrow and Moore, 2021). This led to breaking boundaries as a form of coping.



Places were also used differently and without authorization (Russell and Stenning, 2021).



Those initiatives were spontaneous and ad-hoc highlighting the role of improvisations as a form of coping and caring. Similar examples were shared by social workers, who bypassed regulations to provide support of the kinds indicated above. Reflecting on the action of one of the members of her team, one interviewee shared:



5. Ignored voices and an abandoned generation?

Vulnerable young people's access to education, food, play/leisure and on their abilities to grow, develop, be mentally well and healthy was dramatically impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. What is apparent is that the voices of children and young people in England were mostly ignored, as this age group was neither considered as a priority nor 'at-risk' from a public health perspective. This observation was commonly shared by all interviewees who also heard some concerns directly from young people.

Y, I, T
 (Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the play provision sector, 22/02/2023).

In a context where the responses to COVID-19 were driven by science but also politics, strategies and policies, one of our interviewees shared her anger:

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 C
 W
 T G
 ! (Representative from Local and Combined Authorities Children/Youth Services, 06/06/2023).

Consensus amongst interviews emerged that young people were abandoned but also targeted by divisive health discourses (at least as presented by some parts

of the media and in some social media). The lack of support, post-pandemic, reinforced this feeling.

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 (Representatives from a not-for profit social enterprise focusing on youth education and youth employment, 30/01/2023).

This feeling of abandonment was combined with disempowerment.

(Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the food policy and health food sector, 10/02/2023).

In particular, while the implications of the pandemic on their education and lives' trajectories became very quickly visible (for example highlighted in government reports (typically the Education Committee) and widely debated in national media, there remained limited attention to young people's needs.

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(Representatives from a not-for profit social enterprise focusing on youth education and youth employment, 30/01/2023).

The impact of the pandemic will have detrimental consequences for many children and young in the short and long-term, with many of these not yet visible. The pandemic led to the rise of a COVID-19 generation.

Overall,

(Representative from a charity (incl. Foundations and Think-Tanks) organisation working in the education sector across England, 01/02/23)

and the national responses for children and young people were not appropriate.

A key reason flagged by our interviewees as linked to the inappropriateness of policy formulation.

National decision makers (....). Decisions and policies were

Conclusion

Young people, and particularly vulnerable young people, suffered dramatically during the pandemic and continue to do so. While a significant amount of public funding was allocated to emergency funding during the pandemic, it was nevertheless often insufficient and poorly targeted. Some (vulnerable) children and young people are struggling and will struggle to catch up and have had their lives changed during the pandemic. The latest Destitution Report published in October 2023 (p.9) by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation testifies as to the dramatic increase of the most severe forms of material hardship which includes the inability of families to “meet their most basic physical needs to stay warm, dry, clean and fed”. They note that “approximately 3.8 million people experienced destitution in 2022, including around one million children. This is almost two-and-a-half times the number of people in 2017, and nearly triple the number of children. There is an urgent need for action to tackle destitution in the UK” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2023: 2). The daily survival of children and young people and their families was effectively ensured due to the involvement and commitment of individuals, communities, charities, schools and teachers but also faith groups, who all unprecedentedly stepped-in as part of the ‘pandemic’ solidarity and war effort. Their role and actions are to be remembered, and opportunities to support and amplify that work (alongside suitable national government investment) carefully planned-for in the future.

The work on the PANEX-YOUTH project will continue. There is a need to draw lessons and make recommendations for future pandemic-preparedness, as well as to help find solutions for some of the compound challenges that affect the most vulnerable young people. However, any such recommendations and solutions need to be co-produced with young people. We are currently working with over 50 young people in the West Midlands to explore what incremental and innovative strategies have allowed them to survive the pandemic and its aftermath, to examine the impact on those adaptations on everyday survival and recovery, to question how those adaptations differ from, contrast with, or complement other policy and programmes in particular places, and to co-produce knowledge and innovative thinking with them. Our next (WP4) report will outline how young people want to see their voices heard and what this means in terms of mechanisms and support that will

allow them to cope, be resilient, but also to thrive and fulfil their aspirations.

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