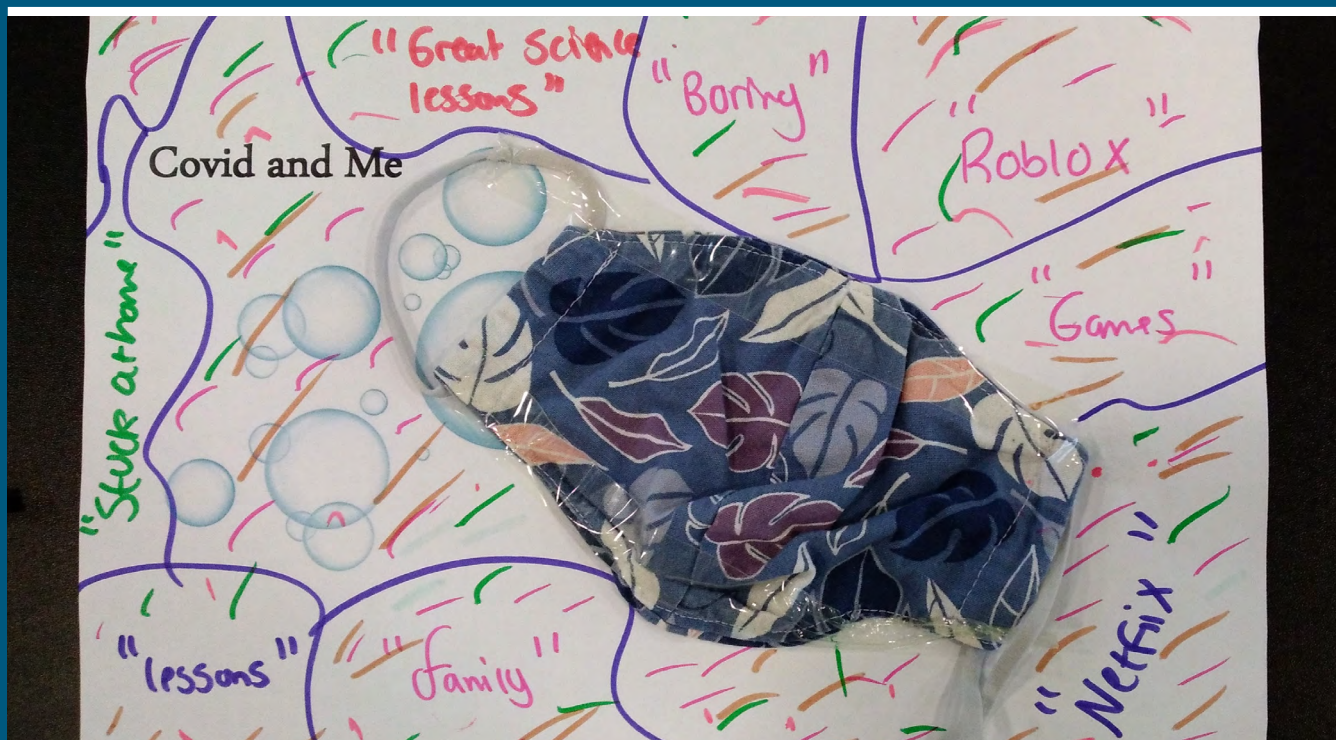


# The impact of COVID-19 on Education, Food and Play/Leisure and Related Adaptations of Children and Young People in England

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



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

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**Authors:** Lauren Andres (University College London, UK), Paul Moawad (University College London, UK) and Peter Kraftl (University of Birmingham, UK)

**To reference:**

Andres, L., Moawad, P., Kraftl, P. (2023), The impact of COVID-19 on Education, Food and Play/Leisure and Related Adaptations of Children and Young People in England, London.

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

# 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; 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 and special educational needs schools. Additionally, lack of access to school impacted on other areas of young people's lives – including access to food. Attempts were made to address these intersectional inequalities and the crucial role of teachers and schools should be highlighted. Teachers went beyond their traditional responsibility by liaising with authorities and social services in order to ensure that learning, food distribution and mental support towards students was provided. Schools also stepped in to coordinate efforts in regards to identifying families at risk, not being able to access Internet and digital devices but also food.

**2.2** The pandemic and associated lockdowns exposed significant **digital divides and digital illiteracy**, as well as a systematic lack of preparedness for pivoting to online or hybrid learning. At the start of the pandemic, most schools neither had the physical spaces, nor the relevant digital platforms, to deal with physical restrictions within schools and deliver remote learning. The steep learning curve had significant implications for children and young people as IT experimentations resulted in uncertainties and forced adaptability for learners. The digital divide and attainment gaps were

found to be prominent in remote learning experiences of most deprived communities and young people living in monetary poor households. Accessibility challenges were exacerbated by home conditions but also the closure of other learning spaces (typically libraries).

In some schools, a community engagement approach was adopted with parents' online help centres, specific training programs and guidebooks introduced. Arrangements also occurred within households and social networks, with families informally grouping for home schooling and in some situations developing innovative home-made solutions to support their children. Keeping learning momentum was key and remaining in touch with families was also a way for schools to maintain their welfare duties (e.g. through hand-delivering learning packs to vulnerable families). Collaboration between schools and local authorities was pivotal and revealed a certain flexibility in providing different forms of learning.

In terms of digital resources, local support mechanisms, driven by charities and communities but also schools, helped provide vulnerable children with devices and tackled the issue of internet access (speed and costs). This included initiatives led by schools, charities, faiths groups and local authorities to secure funding to get dongles and distribute computers (particularly pre-owned laptops). Support also came from private companies.

**2.3** The **home setting and learning from home** presented particular challenges for some vulnerable young people. The nature of the 'home setting' impacted learning and particularly affected children living in crowded houses, with several siblings, where electronic devices were shared or where Internet access was (not) supporting many devices connected simultaneously. Such socio-economic inequalities and how learning could be delivered at home emphasized the vital relationship between the school/teacher(s), young people and their parents. Skills matter here, not only in regard to the ability, time and/or resources of parents to support their children's learning, but also to liaise efficiently with the school.

Home learning was extremely difficult for vulnerable young people and this was also related to being isolated and not being able to seek adequate support. The ad-hoc efforts of schools and teachers were often highly localised and therefore young people in some areas were able to cope better than in others.

**2.4** COVID-19 also impacted **general learning, vocational courses and demographic inequalities**.

The pandemic had particularly profound impacts on vocational training and young people preparing and sitting GCSEs and A levels. Young people in more disadvantaged areas were more likely to emerge worse in terms of 'learning loss' as well as being disadvantaged in attempts to mitigate impacts of COVID-19 on examination processes (e.g. through algorithms designed to predict students' grade outcomes). Beyond long-lasting learning gaps, the pandemic impacted young people's mental health with these impacts continuing post-lockdown. Educational challenges, immediate and long-lasting impacts were unfortunately not isolated from other daily pressures, and this includes access to food and play/leisure.

### **3. Impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable young people's access to food and related adaptations**

Access to food was severely impacted for vulnerable young people during the pandemic and food insecurity increased amongst monetary poor households, along with rising difficulties accessing a balanced diet. Housing insecurity and mental health also intersected with challenges in securing nutritious food – particularly since the pandemic, when the cost of living crises exacerbated the need for families to choose between paying for food, heating and/or rent.

#### **3.1 Food poverty was exacerbated during and after the pandemic amongst monetary-poor households.**

Families from minoritized ethnic groups were particularly affected. Young people relying on accessing food at school suffered greatly as reliance on school meals was significantly disrupted during lockdowns periods. Government schemes (such as vouchers) provided some support but did not fully alleviate the pressures of food poverty.

In the first stage of the pandemic, the lack of coordination of government responses (particularly the non-provision of food during holidays) led to a range of local adaptive responses. Led by schools but also charities, religious and faith groups in partnership, food banks' food was distributed to young people but also to their families, as an emergency response. New community groups emerged (e.g. associations of volunteers within local communities) and mutual aid groups (family/friends/neighbours) through social networks.

3.2 Difficulties in accessing food, **particularly nutritious food**, combined with online-learning limiting movements and the closure of sport facilities meant that young people's lives, their ability to remain physically active but also to keep healthy diet patterns was severely

impinged upon. The quality of food in some food banks and food parcels was not always high, with a higher-than-desired proportion of (ultra-)processed foods being distributed by some. Children's eating habits altered, in part leading to an increase in obesity.

**"Young people relying on accessing food at school suffered greatly as reliance on school meals was significantly disrupted during lockdowns periods."**

3.3 **Experiences of food changed**, as the combination of lockdown and restricted mobilities meant that individual self-sufficiency towards producing and preparing food increased. This was combined with a change of eating habits driven by financial rationales, typically stricter budgeting, less impulse buying, preferences for non-perishable and inexpensive food, and a reduction in meat and dairy consumption. 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.

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. Organisations and charities specialising in food and healthy living stepped in to provide such resources.

### **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 considerations given to play/leisure and the longer-term impact on their development and mental wellbeing. For young people living in monetary poor conditions, such restrictions on their everyday lives were even harsher.

#### **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 range of support and opportunities for socialization for young people.

Socialising outside being restricted, the bedroom became the primary play area, heightening the significance of e-gaming and making the digital realm key to socialization for many young people. 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. 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.

**4.3 Young people did engage in alternative forms of indoor/outdoor playing.** Children forged adaptations, such as by reclaiming neighbourhood streets and re-appropriating them as spaces of interactive play. 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 that often involved children and adults.

Playworkers and play organisations remained engaged in developing innovative ways of gathering children to play online; through various support measures, they also arranged the delivery of play and food parcels to those in need. In some cases, groups of organisations (e.g. faith-based, community, schools, Police, playworkers) came together to provide resources and support, all co-delivered through play spaces and activities.

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

### **5. Ignored voices and an abandoned generation?**

Despite the many challenges that they faced, the voices of (especially vulnerable) 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. 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.

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. The challenges facing this generation exacerbated by the on-going cost of living and inflation crisis with noticeable inequalities amongst regions in England, and between different demographic groups (particularly in terms of income, ethnicity and dis/ability).

The role of the PANEX-YOUTH project continues here as lessons, recommendations and possible solutions need to be constructed for and with young people – a key focus for WP4, which involves detailed action research with young people.