

How will COVID impact youth around the world long-term?

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According to UNICEF, the indirect effects of COVID-19 on children and adolescents are going to be 'substantial and widespread.' Strained health systems, household income loss, school closures and disruptions to preventative interventions like vaccination programmes are just some of the impacts¹ likely to have major long-term consequences for youth. Girls may be disproportionately affected, being the least likely to return to school or find a new job, and the most likely to suffer abuse and violence at home and be forced into early marriage².

Understanding their experiences and perspectives can inform responses and approaches that protect youth and strengthen health systems. We have partnered with Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health (JHSPH) to fund COVID-specific research as part of their Global Early Adolescence Study (GEAS). The results of this research will be used to inform public policy to minimise the negative effects of the pandemic on these young people's life chances.

UNICEF, Johns Hopkins and Plan International are global partners in the AstraZeneca [Young Health Programme](#) (YHP); a disease prevention programme that aims to improve the long-term life chances of young people - through investments in advocacy, research and community programming.

"Our relationship with AstraZeneca goes back to the launch of the YHP in 2010, and their investment in our seminal [Wellbeing of Adolescents in Vulnerable Environments](#) (WAVE) study," said Dr. Robert Blum, Former Chair and Principal Investigator of the GEAS at Johns Hopkins. "This 18 month COVID-focused research will look at diverse youth experiences from the pandemic including how families have been impacted; what support youth need; and what the impact will likely be on their long-term mental health and educational and social prospects."

The research will take place in eleven urban poor communities around the world including Shanghai (China), Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo), New Orleans (USA), Ghent (Belgium) and São Paulo (Brazil).

"Since the pandemic began, all of our school and community based activities for the YHP have stopped. We know this has had an impact on young people, especially the most vulnerable - those who have no access to digital technology to stay connected," says Marc Dunoyer, CFO and Executive Champion of the YHP. "What we want to know is what we can do to help rebuild in the future – to be more prepared and to learn lessons from this pandemic. This is our commitment to youth."

Forced school closures have heavily disrupted the learning process of more than 1.7 billion young people, and the lives of their families³. While distance learning has filled the gap for some, millions of young people in under-resourced settings are being left behind. In Sub-Saharan Africa, 89% of learners do not have access to household computers and 82% lack internet access⁴. Some youth will drop out of the education system altogether, cutting them off from immunisation and health promotion programmes. UNICEF has estimated that these children could number over 24 million⁵.

Almost ten years ago the ground-breaking WAVE studies from JHSPH helped to frame the work of the YHP. With this new research we will once again listen to youth from some of the most marginalised communities, using high quality research to bring this evidence to the attention of policy makers worldwide, and proposing constructive and practical ways forward that can help young people reach their full potential despite the pandemic.

References

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