



## Highlighting Young People’s Lived Experience

*We held conversations with teenagers across the country aged 12-17, and young adults, aged 18-26, on how they have been affected by the pandemic. One of our takeaways from these conversations is how trauma—common among youth in marginalized groups—is now being experienced by the mainstream adolescent population as a result of the pandemic. Just how our young people stabilize will ultimately depend on how our care systems respond. So presented here are some of the powerful experiences and unofficial recommendations from the young people we spoke with. Also included are a few recommendations from practitioners in the field.*

### **The pandemic seriously impacted some youths’ mental health.**

Poor mental health, loneliness, and anxiety plagued many young people, and didn’t necessarily lift with pandemic restrictions. Offers of help sometimes didn’t feel genuine.<sup>12</sup>

- “When I came back to school in 9th grade, it was a huge wake up call. I wasn’t used to being observed full body. I was used to being in front of a screen and texting, so there was a lot of social anxiety and being uncomfortable that came with coming back to school.” ~ M., age 15
- “Something that I have learned about myself and others is what anxiety truly feels like and the multiple forms that it has.” ~ RT, young adult
- “I failed school. I fell into depression. I struggled with self-worth and my career crashed.” ~ DG, young adult
- “I feel like my mental stamina is so much lower just because I wasn't at school, and I wasn't interacting with people and building those connections.” ~ Y., age 17
- “[Coming back to school in person] was really exhausting. I would be fine in school, but hyperaware of everything I was doing and saying and what I looked like—just hyperaware of basically everything around me, because I guess I lost that sense of what to pay attention to and what not to pay attention to.” ~ M., age 15

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<sup>1</sup> Morton, M. & Daniels, G. (2021). Untold stories: Young adult & racial dimensions of COVID-19. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. <https://www.chapinhall.org/wp-content/uploads/Untold-Stories-Final-Report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.) Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey. <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/abes.htm>

- “I never really felt comfortable with video calls because they made me nervous. How my voice was, and if I sounded annoying, or if they liked me, or didn't like me. I always think about how people think about me, and it gets really draining.” ~ J., age 17
- “My school, the stuff that they did for the pandemic was entirely performative and not effective. They'd say, ‘Oh, we're here for you. We're here to help, like, if you need a therapist, we'll see if this one's available. These are tough times.’ And yeah, it wasn't really helpful.” ~ M., age 15
- “I literally found out what anxiety was. COVID happened when I was in 7th [grade], and I'm a sophomore now. I had my first panic attack. And it was like, ‘Anxiety is sometimes loss of appetite,’ and ‘This is how you cope with anxiety.’” ~ A., age 15

### Young people lost out on social development, and they know it.

Periods of isolation short-circuited the normal social development of young people, causing deficits that some expect to be long-term. Research has found that living through the pandemic actually aged the brains of youth<sup>3</sup>. The implications of those findings are not yet clear.

- “I noticed with other people that maturity rates have been going backward. I see that people are more immature because they haven't had that social connection for two years.” ~ Y., age 17
- “It made me more independent as a person, but it also has made me quite nervous to go out in large events because there was such a long period of none of that. And the part of my life where I am supposed to be socializing, my beginning years of high school, were cut out due to the pandemic.” ~ A., age 16
- “I did lose a lot of social interaction, and to add on to that, I don't think the social interaction or the social skills that I lost at that time, I don't think I've been fully able to gain them back.” ~ S., age 17
- “Once my friends, who were virtual with me, came back [to school] in person, they didn't have the ability to make friends, because people had come back in person before them, and they had already created their own social circles. Not only were they isolated during virtual school, because they barely saw people, or because cameras were off and then they never saw faces, but they were isolated after coming back to school, because they never had the opportunity to re-enter social groups.” ~ S., age 17
- “A lot of the people in my group started to develop, not exactly social anxiety, but they started to not be as happy or close as they were before, probably because of the effects of the pandemic, and honestly, it sort of happened to me as well.” ~ A., age 13

### Some groups of youth suffered more than others.

Youth in foster care, youth from low-income families, and young people with disabilities or

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<sup>3</sup> Gotlib, I., Miller, J., Borchers, L., et al. (2022). Effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and brain maturation in adolescents: implications for analyzing longitudinal data. *Biological Psychiatry: Global Open Access*. [https://www.bpsgos.org/article/S2667-1743\(22\)00142-2/fulltext](https://www.bpsgos.org/article/S2667-1743(22)00142-2/fulltext)

family members with health conditions all say the pandemic was different for them than for their peers. Most impacted were young people who lost parents or close relatives.<sup>45</sup>

- “During the pandemic my group home was closed down, then I moved to another one, then an apartment, and then I was kicked out. I didn’t want to go to school with chaos going on.” ~ S. young adult
- “For people like me, Covid is really scary and you have to stay safe. When you have high-riskers in your family it becomes 10 times 10.” ~ A., age 15
- “I’m a hands-on learner, so I took a break from school. I was juggling five different jobs to maintain myself. I was a caretaker for my nephew who was born during the pandemic.” ~ R., young adult
- “There was a lot of grieving. I lost two family members that were important maternal figures for me. There seemed to be no time or space to grieve during the school semester, so I was holding onto it until I could find time to rest.” ~ M., young adult
- “Aging out [of foster care] was very hard, even harder because it was 2020. My mental health suffered a lot. I have a lot of anxiety about the future, I think about it 24/7. Last year all I kept thinking was, ‘I don’t want to be homeless, I don’t want to be homeless.’ It was all-consuming.” ~ S., young adult
- “Before the pandemic, I was working to help out with payments for the house and stuff, but without me working, we weren’t making as much money, so my parents decided it was an opportunity to pick up more hours while I stayed home and watched the kids. So I couldn’t exactly focus on school, because the youngest one wasn’t even a year old yet.” ~ T., age 17

### **Online school had many downsides, but also some real benefits.**

Some students report feeling disconnected, and academic gains slowed down. But other students found a new and better school experience online.<sup>6</sup>

- “The Zoom meetings I had didn’t start til noon or 1 o’clock. It was nice because I could wake up when I wanted, have a nice breakfast and all that. It made me more productive throughout the day because I wasn’t tired and falling asleep right when I got to school.” ~ A., age 17

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<sup>4</sup> John Burton Advocates for Youth. (May 2021) Holding on by a Thread: The Cumulative Impact of the Pandemic on Youth Who Have Been in Foster Care or Homeless  
<https://jbay.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/JBAY-COVID-19-Impact.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> 2021, Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory

<https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Cingel, D., Lauricella, A. et al. (2022) U.S. adolescents’ attitudes toward school, social connection, media use, and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: Differences as a function of gender identity and school context. *PLoS ONE* 17(10): e0276737. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0276737>

- “I have separation anxiety from my parents and Covid was kind of an opportunity for me to finally do schooling from home and my parents at the time were working from home, too, so it was kind of the best thing for me.” ~ O., age 12
- “I loved virtual school because I felt like I could time-manage a lot better. I felt like there's a lot of fluff in the school day where we're just getting directions or reading aloud in class, where if I read it to myself in my head, it would go so much faster. I liked it so much.” ~ S., age 17
- “Virtual schooling was a lot more accommodating...than in-person school ever will be, in the sense that I think teachers were more understanding and more concerned during the period of time where we were online.” ~ S., age 17
- “When I move around in class I often get yelled at, so the good part about virtual was that I got to move around in classes, where in in-person, I don't.” ~ J., age 17
- “In in-person classes, they are explaining everything to you at their pace. The teacher is talking how they want to talk; for me what helped a lot was getting all the notes we were learning that day and I could read them as fast as I wanted to read them so I could understand them at my own pace....Online I could work ahead without getting yelled at for doing the assignment ahead of time.” ~ C., age 17

### **Youth had unstructured time on their hands, and made use of it.**

The pandemic slowed down and even eliminated typical social experiences. At the same time, it created new space for self-exploration, and many young people used it to develop or refine new interests. Unprogrammed time, without being watched or seen by teachers or friends, turned out to be a plus.

- “I tried hiking and going for walks, but my physical health wasn't really great. But as we progressed I was able to do a little bit more, and I was able to try yoga and Pilates and like, new ways of being.” ~ S., age 17
- “I used to crochet a long time ago and during COVID I picked it back up, and now it's something I do very consistently.” A., age 15
- “As I got more stressed, I was unable to do anything other than just veg out in front of the TV, but it honestly ended up being okay. I started watching Criminal Minds, and there's 19 seasons of that. And I got very invested.... And I actually started researching what real profiling is. And I'm majoring in criminology next year, because of what I learned.” ~ S., age 17
- “When everything was open and there was no pandemic, I never had the time to be at home and sit down to paint, but once we were doing online school, and I couldn't go see my friends, and everything was closed, I had all the free time in the world. Painting became a stress-reliever for me, and I still paint two years after everything originally shut down.” ~ A., age 16

- “I did a lot of baking, I made a lot of cookies, a pie, and stuff like that. I like chemistry a lot, so that was fun. But at the same time, I think for me personally it wasn't very healthy, because I was eating a lot of junk and sugar and processed food.” ~ J., age 17

### **The pandemic transformed some young people’s worldview.**

The pandemic prompted some young people to look around at society, their peers, and even their families in a new way. Sometimes they liked what they saw, and sometimes they didn’t.<sup>7</sup>

- “One thing that I had learned from others during the pandemic is that many people will look out for themselves over anyone else.... I knew that there was a real-world disaster happening and people were dying because of Covid. It wasn’t just a joke, and I learned that I wanted to be someone who spoke up for that.” ~ A., age 16
- “I used to think I liked school, but [after school went online], I realized I enjoyed being at school because it wasn’t my house. That was one of the things I realized. I absolutely hated being at my house for so many different reasons. Now that I’ve gotten out, it’s led to totally realizing a bunch of other things from there.” ~ T., age 17
- “My group wasn't really respecting the Covid rules, and that made me uncomfortable. But it also made me realize that I didn't want to be friends with people who didn't think about others. [My friends’] mental health is so bad that they *needed* this interaction, and I totally respect that. But we kind of showed that we had differing values, which all came to a head when we all were back at school.” ~ S., age 17
- “I am very prideful. I have trouble asking for help. [During the pandemic] I learned the value of family and friends. People come into your life for different reasons and they fill your cup in different ways.” ~ SP, young adult
- “I learned that there’s more than just a good and a bad person. I always thought there was a right and a wrong way. It was interesting to me to learn there’s more than one right way. I never really thought outside of myself before. I often judge people too quickly. We’re all under the same umbrella of what is happening, but experiencing it in different ways.” ~ O., young adult

### **What youth want adults to consider.**

The pandemic also prompted young people to engage in internal and external reflections, and come to some new realizations about what they want and need from the adults around them.

- “Stop trivializing the impacts of Covid, the impacts it has on us. I think as youth, it's very easy for adults to say ‘Oh, you're just in school, you can make everything up when you go to college, or when you join the workforce...You haven't had to lose your job. It's easy for our experiences to be trivialized and for it to be like ‘Oh, you haven't lost as much, or you haven't undergone as much because you haven't had to deal with the adult experience of it.’” ~ S., age 17

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<sup>7</sup> Students Weigh In, Part IV, YouthTruth (2022) <https://youthtruthsurvey.org/students-weigh-in-part4/>

- “Move the school start time later. People are more productive, people are paying attention in class. It benefits teachers and students.” ~ O., age 16
- “Scheduling weekly mental health check-ins would be helpful. Meditating or doing something to get a break from the day.” ~ A., age 17
- “Give students more ability to dictate how they pace themselves.” – C., age 17
- “Listen to our voices and don’t pretend to understand us if you truly don’t...Also, have deep, meaningful conversations about things. Don’t just scratch the surface and leave it at that. Let youth tell you details.” ~ A., age 16
- “Adults can give teenagers a break. We are trying to do our best. It takes a while to reset your mindset and get back to how things were before.” ~ A., age 14
- “In Student Council, one of the coolest things we did was a mental health video on the impact of Covid. It was so helpful, and we showed it to staff...I think all teens should share their story. I think everyone has a different perspective on [what happened in the pandemic].” ~ C., age 17

## Listening to Youth: The Adult Perspective

*To scaffold our conversations with young people, we conducted a national survey of approximately 100 professional colleagues, and held focused conversations with another 25 adults working in positive youth development programs, with foster youth, and in under-resourced K-12 schools across the country. We wanted to find out how these past two years affected their work with young people.*

### What adults want adults to consider.

- “Youth want space to think about, question, and discover themselves; to think about possibilities in a new way. Youth are discovering pathways to learning that are outside of school.”
- “Students have been able to get a better sense of how they work best (remotely or in person, independently or in groups, etc.)”
- “Loneliness and isolation has been a common thread, especially for disabled and immunocompromised youth and adults, and highlights how deep the lack of support for these folks is in communities.”
- “Dealing with sustained grief in so many ways takes a toll all on people, but especially on young people.”
- “The emotional intelligence of some youth seems especially stunted—the transition from middle to high school feels sudden and rough.”

- “Let go of what you think is best for youth, and let youth speak for themselves. Keep enough structure for youth to know what’s going on, but let them direct their own energy and needs within what you’re doing.”
- “Practices in trauma informed care, how trauma is stored in the brain and the body are tangible ways to show care to young people.”
- “Youth appreciate transparency and being treated like adults. They don't need the unsolicited advice from yet another adult.”
- “In rural communities and there aren’t mental health workers or access in a lot of places. I’m hearing from young people and providers about how amazing telehealth has been.”
- “Step away from the ‘pick yourself up from the boot-straps’ mentality because it isn’t healthy. Someone needing time for rest and grieving isn’t a bad thing.”
- “Just because we’ve always done things a certain way doesn’t mean we have to continue that way; adults should be more open to change.”
- “Not being college educated doesn’t mean you’re not educated. We don’t give enough credit to lived experience.”
- “Young people know a lot, and a lot more than what older people give them credit for.”